LITERACY AS FREEDOM

Acknowledgements

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Preface

Expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy – this is the way that Nobel prizewinner Amartya Sen articulates his conception of what human development is about. His view is a major influence in the current development debate and lies behind the title of this collection of papers: "Literacy as Freedom". Literacy is indeed one of the fundamental instruments of freedom. In today's world the use of written communication is embedded in socio-political and economic systems at local, national and global levels. It is part of the way institutions function and is a key to learning opportunities. However, individuals and communities use a wide range of literacy practices, calling upon different 'literacies' in different contexts and for different purposes. There is no standard solution, no single way of acquiring or using literacy.

The impetus for this volume was a desire to understand better, both in theory and in practice, what literacy as freedom means to people in different contexts, yet linked by the forces of globalization and change. The occasion was International Literacy Day 2002 when unesco organized a round-table on this theme. The participants, whose contributions appear here, came from all parts of the world. The aim is to broaden the debate, for it is crucially important that the promotion of literacy, a central part of unesco's mandate, takes place in full recognition of local circumstances and national realities. It is only when learners themselves play a full role in determining the place of literacy in their lives that written communication will be of real use as one of their daily communication strategies.

These papers set literacy at the intersection of the institutional and the personal, the powerful and the powerless, the marginalized and the mainstream, the male and the female, the governmental and the communal. This is where the debate must take place, for in itself, literacy can be a tool of empowerment or disempowerment. It is how literacy is used that matters, how it is acquired that will determine its value to the learner. The more we understand about the processes in which literacy is embedded, the better chance we have, as a global community, to see literacy become a true instrument of freedom.

Introduction

C. Robinson

Too often discussion of literacy remains bound by issues of techniques and modes of delivery. However, the practice of literacy is woven into all aspects of the social fabric as one means of communication among others. Literacy practices have an impact on the lives of everyone, however little or much individuals engage personally with literacy. For example, the dependence of government bureaucracies on written communication shows how everyone's life is affected by the use of literacy. It is because literacy is thus embedded in societal relationships and social change that this volume bears the title *Literacy as Freedom*. This echoes the title of Amartya Sen's influential book *Development as Freedom*[1] and sought to explore perspectives and practices of literacy in relation to human freedom.

1 Sen's Framework

To set the scene, Sen examines the value of literacy in the pursuit of options and opportunities tending to maximize human freedom. However, the larger context of Sen's work provides an interesting and illuminating backdrop for the perspectives presented in his paper. We might therefore ask: where does literacy fit in relation to the larger concept of development as freedom? What new light does this view of development shed on literacy?

Sen brings to the development debate a determination to keep in focus both the individual and the social, seeing both aspects, and their interrelationship, as crucial to an understanding of what development is about, and how it might be pursued. Development may be seen as the freedom to choose and pursue the kind of life which people have reason to value; within this the actions of the individual will both shape and

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1 Amartya Sen. 1999.
   Development as Freedom.
   Oxford: Oxford
   University Press.

be shaped by the larger social context. "Unfreedoms," such as premature mortality, lack of access to education or health services, insecurity, famine, lack of work, and denial of political and civil liberties, are socially structured. From a societal point of view, Sen makes it clear that different societies value different freedoms and thus set different parameters for structuring social change. However, it is the freedom of individuals which is seen as the basic building block of development. This approach differs in emphasis from that of much development literature in the last 20 years which has emphasized the need for structural change at a societal level, downplaying the role of the individual. Sen examines social structures, such as markets, governance and the state, but maintains a link between social support for expanding people's freedoms and individual responsibility in exercising them. The need for such social support is clear, as for example with literacy:

A child who is denied the opportunity of elementary schooling is not only deprived as a youngster, but also handicapped all through life (as a person unable to do certain basic things that rely on reading, writing and arithmetic). (Sen 1999: 284).

Beyond the lack of literacy as an example of an "unfreedom", there is an interesting parallel between the societal/individual linkages in Sen's work and in the literacy debate. Perceptions have moved away from seeing literacy primarily as an individual skill towards a view of literacy as social practice. This has led to valuable insights into how people use literacy and literacies, and what it does for them, but it has also led to a neglect of the unavoidable individual aspect of literacy, namely that it is acquired individually. The next stage of the literacy debate must include the difficult questions – which Sen examines for development as a whole – of how individual acquisition of literacy might best be structured so that its social practices (different literacies) give most support to the pursuit of freedom.

Sen uses the concepts of capability and agency as key elements of the pursuit of freedom. Capability relates to individual advantages in terms of social justice and may be defined as the 'substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (Sen 1999: 87). Agency refers to 'the role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions' (Sen 1999: 19).

A further parallel may be drawn between these concepts and the instrumental nature of literacy in the pursuit of development. A key insight in Sen's view of development is the distinction he makes between poverty as lack of income and poverty as deprivation of capability. It is not merely level of income which defines poverty, but lack of opportunity to choose and benefit from certain options. Where opportunities do exist, the extent to which people may benefit from them depends on "capabilities," of which level of income is one. Health, political freedom, availability of certain kinds of opportunities are others. This makes for an approach which is both sensitive to context and holistic. Sen discusses agency with particular emphasis on increasing the 'agency' of women. The question is then how far literacy serves to enhance both capability and agency. With regard to the latter, Sen sees literacy as one of the elements of empowerment which raises the agency of women, along with, for example, participation in the labour force. He notes that

…some variables relating to women's agency (in this case female literacy) often play a much more important role in promoting social well-being (in this case child survival) than variables relating to the general level of opulence in society (Sen 1999: 198).

The notion of capabilities enables a clearer distinction of ends and means. Income, education, health, civil liberties – these are all seen as means

for the achievement of substantive freedoms. This is quite different from many arguments used currently, where health and education, for example, are seen as a means to achieve the end of greater income. For Sen, income is merely one capability which interacts with others – such as literacy – to achieve the end of greater freedoms. Thus literacies find their place as both socially structured and individual practices – their use, along with that of other capabilities of different kinds, may offer opportunities, within a particular social context, for the individual to overcome "unfreedoms". Lest Sen should be charged with underestimating the effect of social structure on individual capacity to effect change, it should be noted that he states:

But the capabilities that a person does actually have (and not merely theoretically enjoys) depend on the nature of social arrangements, which can be crucial for individual freedoms. And there the state and society cannot escape responsibility (Sen 1999: 288).

Thus, in terms of Sen's concepts of agency and capability, neither too little nor too much is claimed for the impact of any one capability. Rather than assessing the impact of literacy per se, it will be more fruitful, in this approach, to discover how it works together with other capabilities and elements of agency. In general, Sen's holistic approach to development, rather than an overwhelmingly economic one, gives more space to the consideration of social practices such as literacy and other kinds of communication – as means, and as ends, that is as elements of the freedoms which, Sen contends, are the purpose of development. In his paper in this volume, he explores dimensions of how this works.

An interesting connection can be made between Sen's definition of the value of freedoms and recent thinking about literacy. As indicated earlier,

the kind of freedoms that Sen espouses and propounds are those which enable individuals to 'lead the kind of life they have reason to value'. The careful formulation of this phrase shows that Sen recognizes that people value different things in different places, contexts and cultures. Indeed, Sen addresses the question of the universality and particularity of values (including that of "freedoms") as part of his work. It is clear, however, that the range of capabilities employed to achieve freedoms will depend on what those values are, on what individuals and communities 'have reason to value'. Thus the use of literacy and education, as one of those capabilities, will vary. This connects directly with the notion of multiple literacies – a concept which has been fruitful in determining where literacy fits into the communication practices of particular contexts. Analysis of literacy practices in a number of contexts has informed the thinking and theories about literacy, leading to a growing consensus among academics and practitioners that literacy promotion must first and foremost understand and respect the context of use. The opinions expressed in this volume make clear that there is a remarkable strength of consensus around the centrality of the local context as a key parameter in literacy work. This is demonstrated by commitment to diverse approaches and by an appreciation that literacy work must be viewed, analysed and planned on the basis of full respect for people's lives and values. Literacy as a standardized technical skill, often delivered in rigid institutional frameworks and only in certain languages, has frequently led not towards freedom, but towards a passive acceptance of dominant structures and discourse. Literacy, manifest as particular literacies and acquired in context-sensitive ways, can be one of the capabilities which enable us to challenge and to change constraining social realities and thus move towards development as freedom.

2 The International Context

If Sen's work provides an intellectual framework for this volume, the international context provides a setting for the process, in particular the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012). Between 1999 when the initial decision of the United Nations General Assembly was taken, and 2001 when the dates of the Decade were confirmed, unesco began the planning process. A new thrust under the banner of "Literacy for All" will marshal forces and channel energies in a new commitment to promote literacy across all ages and as part of learning opportunities inside and outside the school system. Efforts will focus specially on the 862 million adults who as yet have no access to literacy. The Decade is part of the *Education for All* (efa) movement, but has the particular requirement, unique among efa initiatives, of reporting to the United Nations General Assembly.

The General Assembly has tasked unesco with the co-ordinating role for the Decade, so this volume served as input to its plans to mobilize and build partnerships to carry the Decade forward. Plans for the Decade emphasize the need to extend "Literacy to All," in appropriate ways. Under the banner of "Literacy for All" the Decade aims at 'voice for all and learning for all' with an emphasis on the poorest and most marginalized people. Sustainable learning within a dynamic and self-renewing literate environment is the vision which will inspire ten years of concerted effort. As the Draft Proposal and Plan states:

A key to success lies precisely in merging Literacy Decade activities with the regular life of families, schools, local and national communities, and within the agendas of international organizations.[2]

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2 United Nations. 2001. Draft Proposal and Plan for a United Nations Literacy Decade - a/56/114-e/2001/93.

Views on the advisability of such a Decade, or indeed of any such initiative are mixed. Experience shows that events of this kind may in the end make very little difference on the ground, at the grassroots. On the other hand, the size of the global literacy challenge is such that there is an urgent need to scale up literacy efforts, to bring in partners who will embed and use literacy in their programmes, to sensitize governments to the gaps and possibilities, to gather new resources, and above all to build productive partnerships with civil society and communities. With these challenges in mind, this volume is part of the dialogue and pooling of energies that are crucial if the Decade is to move forward with broad ownership and common commitment.

3 Overview

Following the paper by Sen six further papers represent experience from various parts of the world, offering views from civil society, the fraught context of Middle East, the youngest nation in Africa – Eritrea – the indigenous peoples of Latin America, and two papers from South Asia where 70 per cent of the world's literacy needs are found.

From the perspective of civil society David Archer challenges all those involved in promoting literacy to look again at their assumptions regarding literacy. Underlining the historical and colonial baggage which comes with the term, he sets literacy firmly in the context of broader social parameters, particularly social justice and the maintenance of power. Only when the promotion of literacy leads to critical questioning of power structures can it be said to lead to freedom. Furthermore, literacy acquisition must be a process of using literacy in real-life situations, not a classroom exercise. Archer explores some implications both for literacy programmes and literacy assessment, noting the urgent need to get beyond the dubious reliability of current international statistics. Critical debate about these issues is an urgent priority among all literacy stakeholders.

Munir Fasheh takes a personal look at what literacy means. He contrasts his own institutionally structured literacy with the knowledge and capacities of his mother, who was technically illiterate. However, her learning and use of knowledge, and the connections with her social and cultural environment, provide a striking contrast with Fasheh's own schooled literacy. This leads him to enumerate some of the negative impacts of literacy of this kind, such as a reduced capacity to apply knowledge or to learn from experience. He sets this in the socio-political context of Palestine and recounts a number of teaching and learning experiences which have challenged received wisdom on literacy. He demonstrates how his own learning has had to include unlearning the habits of institutional literacy.

Based on contemporary efforts to promote literacy in the relatively young country of Eritrea, Dimam Ghebrezghi describes efforts to plan and implement literacy for all parts of the population. Literacy programming shows a strong commitment to respecting diversity, particularly by the use of Eritrea's languages and by organizing flexible delivery modes. Even greater flexibility will be required to give literacy opportunities to groups such as nomads. Ghebrezghi presents the policy context and sets out the way that literacy work is organized. Data on literacy programmes show a completion rate of around 70 per cent and a high female participation rate. Nevertheless, measures to overcome barriers to female literacy will require committed efforts. In the context of promoting efa, Eritrea faces challenges of developing an ongoing literate environment, particularly through the development of local language materials, of reaching populations displaced because of the recent war, of building institutional capacity and of allocating adequate resources.

Mirian Masaquiza writes out of her own Kichwa-Salasaca background and keen commitment to indigenous people's rights to describe the histo-

ry and contemporary situation of literacy among indigenous peoples in Ecuador. Her material makes it clear that efforts have been made to develop an institutional framework for the specific demands of education and literacy among indigenous peoples. However, the nature of partnership with indigenous peoples themselves has not been clear or transparent. A further constraint has been the lack of attention to developing materials and training in indigenous languages – an essential condition of appropriate literacy work. The result is that literacy needs among indigenous groups remain much higher than in the rest of the population. This situation will only change when literacy promotion is combined with the learning of productive skills and, above all, with full respect for and use of indigenous languages, knowledge and cultures.

Literacy for women in India provides the context for Ila Patel's discussion of the role of literacy in empowerment. Access to literacy is seen as one manifestation of gender inequality in society more generally, and even when women have access they often find materials which reproduce stereotypes of female subordination. Referring to Sen's 'development as freedom', Patel sees literacy as one, but only one, element in empowering women to make choices to acquire new freedoms. From a close examination of the state of women's literacy in India and of the policy and programme options adopted by the government, Patel argues that it is not literacy in itself which has brought women's empowerment, but rather the social space provided by literacy processes. She concludes that an empowering kind of literacy will be one that accompanies collective mobilization and is embedded in specific development initiatives.

The final paper by Bharati Silawal, sets women's empowerment in the context of cultural patterns and traditional patterns of behaviour – the patriarchal system prevailing in South Asia and in Nepal in particular. She

makes explicit the multi-faceted exploitation to which women are subject in that region. She argues that literacy, and education more generally, must lead to empowerment which redresses entrenched injustice and to a change in societal attitudes. A ten-point approach which fosters a reversal of gender discrimination is presented. In the context of recent initiatives in the promotion of universal primary education, Ms Silawal points to the decentralization of authority for schooling to communities in Nepal – the Commmunity Owned Primary Education (cope) programme. Specific measures to improve educational opportunities for girls are built in, notably through the deliberate recruitment of female teachers, as well as the adoption of local flexibility in the school calendar to accommodate varied patterns of life. In addition, local management has resulted in ridding schools of violence and linking learning with the wider environment. She notes that there remains the challenge of appointing more women to programme management positions.

Following these papers, The Ongoing Debate identifies eight major themes of debate. The most striking feature is the consensus around the importance of local context – whether manifested in the languages of literacy and local ownership, or in the need to ensure that local realities inform and structure the use of technologies of any kind, the design of gender-sensitive approaches or in the formation of partnerships for literacy.

The volume concludes with a set of recommendations addressed to unesco in its role as co-ordinating agency for the United Nations Literacy Decade. This is followed by a section reminding literacy professionals that dialogue and debate only make sense when they result in greater opportunities for our fellow human beings who still – a blot on the face of the twenty-first century – wait for the chance to put literacies to work in their lives.

Reflections on Literacy[1]

Amartya Sen

There is an old Bengali saying that knowledge is a very special commodity: the more you give away, the more you have left. Imparting education not only enlightens the receiver, but also broadens the giver – the teachers, the parents, the friends. Schooling not only benefits the person being schooled, but also others who are close to those who are being schooled. Basic education is a truly social good, which people can share and from which they can jointly benefit, without having to snatch it from others. This old insight is worth recollecting.

I am grateful to unesco for reasserting the importance – indeed the necessity – of literacy and basic education. When h.g. Wells said, in his *Outline of History*, 'human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe,' he was not exaggerating. If we continue to neglect basic education, we shall not be able to overcome the tremendous problems that our precarious world faces – nor avoid potential catastrophes, which are now even more plentifully present than they were in h.g. Wells's time.

Since the terrible events of 11 September 2001 – and what followed after that – the world has been very aware of problems of insecurity. But insecurity comes in many different ways – not just through terrorism and violence. It is remarkable that for nearly every kind of human insecurity, education can have a preventive role – a constructive contribution to make. While the war against terrorism is fought across the world, it is extremely important not to overlook the multidimensional nature of human insecurity, and the variety of different ways in which the lives of vulnerable people across the globe tend to be threatened and made deeply insecure.

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1 This paper is the text of an address given to the public celebration on International Literacy Day 2002 in Paris by means of a video recording produced for the occasion.

Let me consider briefly the variety of ways in which schooling helps to reduce human insecurity across the world – the different routes through which education can help to make the lives of precarious people more secure, more safe and more fulfilled.

The first – and perhaps the most basic issue – relates to the fact that illiteracy and innumeracy are forms of insecurity in themselves. Not to be able to read or write or count or communicate is itself a tremendous deprivation. And if a person is thus reduced by illiteracy and innumeracy, we can not only see that the person is insecure to whom something terrible could happen, but more immediately, that to him or her something terrible has actually happened. The extreme case of insecurity is the certainty of deprivation, and the absence of any chance of avoiding that fate. The basic deprivation of illiteracy and innumeracy is, thus, an extreme case of insecurity. Indeed, the first and most immediate contribution of successful primary education is a direct reduction of this extreme insecurity – the certainty of leading a deprived and reduced life.

The difference that basic education can make to human life is easy to see. In a small way, it has been personally wonderful for me to observe how easily the benefits of education are perceived by even the poorest and the most deprived families. This emerges from some studies on primary education in India that we are currently undertaking (through the "Pratichi Trust" – a trust aimed at basic education and gender equity that I have been able to set up in India and Bangladesh through using my Nobel Prize money from 1998). As our first results come, it makes me tremendously happy to see how the parents from even the poorest and most depressed families long to give basic education to their children, to make them grow up without the terrible handicaps from which they – the parents – had themselves suffered. Contrary to claims often made, we

have not observed any reluctance by parents to send their children –
daughters as well as boys – to school, if schooling opportunities actually
exist in their neighbourhood.

Second, basic education can be very important in helping people to get
jobs and gainful employment. This connection, while always present,
is particularly critical in a rapidly globalizing world in which quality con-
trol and production according to strict specification can be crucial. Any
country that neglects basic education tends to doom its illiterate people
to inadequate access to the opportunities of global commerce. A person
who cannot read instructions, understand the demands of accuracy, and
follow the demands of specifications is at a great disadvantage in getting
a job in today's globalizing world.

Not surprisingly, all the cases of successful use of the opportunities of
global commerce for the reduction of poverty have involved the route
of basic education on a wide basis. Already in mid-nineteenth century
the task was seen with remarkable clarity in Japan. The Fundamental
Code of Education, issued in 1872 (shortly after the Meiji Restoration
in 1868), expressed the public commitment to make sure that there must
be 'no community with an illiterate family, nor a family with an illiter-
ate person.' Kido Takayoshi, one of the leaders of Japanese reform,
explained the basic idea: 'Our people are no different from the Americans
or Europeans of today; it is all a matter of education or lack of educa-
tion.' Thus began Japan's remarkable attempt at catching up with the
West. By 1910 Japan was almost fully literate, at least for the young, and
by 1913, though still very much poorer than Britain or America, Japan
was publishing more books than Britain and more than twice as many as
the United States. The concentration on education determined, to a large
extent, the nature and speed of Japan's economic and social progress.

Later on, China, Taiwan, South Korea and other economies in East Asia followed similar routes and firmly focused on basic education. In explaining their rapid economic progress, their willingness to make good use of the global market economy is often praised, and rightly so. But that process was greatly helped by the achievements of these countries in basic education. Widespread participation in a global economy would have been hard to accomplish if people could not read or write, or produce according to specifications or instructions.

In the particular case of China, its rapid economic advancement subsequent to the reforms of 1979 was crucially helped by its educational achievements in the pre-reform period. Mao Tse-Tung's commitment to basic education was not, of course, aimed at making it easier to have a successful market economy, but it certainly had that effect. One of the conundrums of global economic history is that even though Mao Tse-Tung focused on basic education as a part of his commitment to socialism (not to capitalism or to a market economy), later on (after the reforms of 1979) that very educational focus made it much easier for post-reform China to benefit from a dynamic market economy linked to global trade. I guess this is not really a paradox, since education is a general-purpose resource that expands basic human capability which can bring a variety of different types of rewards. Basic education can help greatly no matter whether the enhanced capability resulting from it is used to run a socialist society or a market economy.

Third, when people are illiterate, their ability to understand and invoke their legal rights can be very limited. This can be a severe handicap for those whose rights are violated by others, and it tends to be a persistent problem for people at the bottom of the ladder, whose rights are often effectively alienated because of their inability to read and see what they are entitled to demand and how.

This is a particularly important issue for women's security, since women are often deprived of their due, thanks to illiteracy. Indeed, not being able to read or write is a significant barrier for underprivileged women, since this can lead to their failure to make use even of the rather limited rights they may legally have (say, to own land, or other property, or to appeal against unfair judgment and unjust treatment). There are often legal rights in rulebooks that are not used because the aggrieved parties cannot read those rulebooks. Lack of schooling can, thus, directly lead to insecurity by distancing the deprived from the ways and means of fighting against that deprivation.

Fourth, illiteracy can also muffle the political opportunities of the underdog, by reducing their ability to participate in political arena and to express their demands effectively. This can contribute directly to their insecurity, since the absence of voice in politics can entail a severe reduction of influence and the likelihood of just treatment.

The connection between voice and security can well be very powerful, and perhaps I should scrutinize this connection a little. The observed fact that famines do not occur in democracies is just one illustration of the effectiveness of political voice and participation. It is remarkable that in the long history of famines in the world, there has never been a famine in a democratic country which gives political voice to all. This is not really surprising, since elections are hard to win after a famine (if elections are held), and stinging criticisms of the government for its failure to prevent a famine are hard to answer (if criticisms are politically permitted, rather than being censured out, and if a free press exists). These recognitions force the ruling governments in democracies to act quickly and effectively to prevent famines. Famines have, thus, never occurred in democracies

(even in very poor ones), but have taken place when a free political voice is suppressed, for example under colonial rule (whether overtly, as in British India, or implicitly, as in Ireland of the 1840s), or under one-party authoritarian systems (as in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, or in China during 1958-61, or in Cambodia in the 1970s, or in North Korea right now), or under military rule (as in Ethiopia or Somalia or Sudan in recent decades). Political voice makes the prevention of famines a public policy imperative.

However, while the demand to stop famines is not hard to articulate, using political voice to eliminate more complex and less extreme forms of deprivation can be much harder. Even though starvation deaths or massive epidemics are extremely easy to point to, endemic under-nourishment that does not kill immediately, but can have long-run effects on health and survival, is not so easy to bring to serious public attention. Here, basic education can greatly help people to raise their political voice against less extreme but nevertheless significant forms of deprivations, such as endemic under-nourishment, or discriminating treatment given to particular groups. For example, while my own country, India, stopped having serious famines with independence and the establishment of a multi-party democracy, the continuation of a high level of illiteracy has made it harder to bring less extreme forms of deprivation into active confrontation in the public arena. Thus, illiteracy and under-nourishment can be politically linked, and the two have to be tackled together.

Fifth, empirical work in recent years has brought out very clearly how the relative respect and regard for women's well-being is strongly influenced by such variables as women's ability to earn an independent income, to find employment outside the home, to have ownership rights, and to have literacy and be educated participants in decisions within

and outside the family. Indeed, even the survival disadvantage of women compared with men in many developing countries (which leads to such terrible phenomenon as tens of millions of "missing women") seems to go down sharply – and may even get eliminated – with progress in women's empowerment, for which literacy is a basic ingredient.

These different factors (such as, female literacy and education, women's earning power, their economic role outside the family, women's property rights, and so on) may at first sight appear to be rather diverse and disparate influences that somehow work together, but what they all have in common is their positive contribution to women's voice and agency, through greater independence and empowerment of women. The diverse variables which have emerged from statistical studies as being favourable to women's security (such as literacy, economic opportunity, etc.) thus can be seen to be part and parcel of a unified empowering role. Women's power – economic independence as well as social emancipation – can have far-reaching impacts on the forces and organizing principles that govern decisions within the family.

There is considerable evidence, for example, that the fertility rates tend to go down sharply with greater empowerment of women. This is not surprising, since the lives that are most battered by the frequent bearing and rearing of children are those of young women, and anything that enhances their decision-making power and increases the attention that their interests receive tend, in general, to prevent over-frequent child bearing. For example, in a comparative study of the different districts within India, it emerges that women's education and women's employ-ment are the two most important influences in reducing fertility rates. Indeed, in that extensive study, these two are the only variables that have a statistically significant impact in explaining variations in fertility rates across more than three hundred districts that make up India. If, for example, the state of Kerala in India has a fertility rate of only 1.7

(roughly 1.7 children on the average, per couple), in contrast with many areas which have four children per couple (or even more), Kerala's high level of female education is clearly a major reason that has made this achievement possible. With the rise in female education in other regions, fertility rates are also falling sharply, for example in the once-backward Himachal Pradesh.

There is also much evidence that women's education and literacy tend to reduce the mortality rates of children. The influence works through many channels, but perhaps most immediately, it works through the importance that mothers typically attach to the welfare of the children, and the opportunity they have, when their agency is respected and empowered, to influence family decisions in that direction. These connections between basic education of women and the power of women's agency are quite central to understanding the contribution of education to human security in general.

Finally, we must also address the difficult issue of the coverage of education and the curriculum. This has obvious relevance to the development of technical skill that facilitate participation in the contemporary world. But there are also other issues involved, since schooling can be deeply influential in the identity of a person and the way we see each other, and this can have serious implications for conflicts and violence.

This issue has received some attention recently in the special context of the role of religious schools (such as Madrassas) in the growth of fundamentalism (such as Islamic fundamentalism). The problem, however, is much more extensive than these particular – and rather extreme – examples may suggest. In many countries in the world a severe narrowing of cultural outlook is advocated by sectarian political groups. And

this "miseducation" can have profoundly destabilizing effects on the security of people that the sectarian activists target.

Indeed, the nature of education is quite central to peace in the world. Recently the perspective of "clash of civilizations" (promoted by a great many commentators, including intellectuals as well as political leaders) has gained much currency, and what is most immediately divisive in this outlook is not the idea of the inevitability of a clash (that too, but it comes later), but the prior insistence on seeing human beings in terms of one dimension only: just as a member of one civilization or another. To see people in terms of this allegedly pre-eminent and all-engulfing classification of civilizations can itself contribute to political insecurity, since in this view people are seen as simply belonging to, say, "the Muslim world," or "the Western world," or "the Hindu world," or "the Buddhist world," and so on. As it happens, every human being has many identities, related to nationality, language, location, class, religion, occupation, political beliefs, and so on. To ignore everything other than some single, allegedly profound, way of classifying people is to set them up into warring camps. The best hope for peace in the world lies in the simple but far-reaching recognition that we all have many different associations and affiliations, and we need not see ourselves as being rigidly divided by a single categorization of hardened groups which confront each other.

Here too schooling, with an appropriate concern for real history and basic values such as the universal need for tolerance, can have a very positive and constructive role. While we celebrate the power of literacy, we have reason to think also about the content of education and the way literacy can facilitate – rather than endanger – peace and security. The importance of non-sectarian and non-parochial curricula that expand, rather than reduce, the reach of reason can be hard to exagger-

ate. Shakespeare has talked about the fact that 'some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.' In the schooling curriculum, we have to make sure that we do not have smallness "thrust upon" the young.

To conclude, we must go on fighting for basic education for all, but also emphasize the importance of the content of education. We have to make sure that sectarian schooling does not convert education into a prison, rather than being a passport to the wide world (as it is meant to be). Education can be a great liberator of the human mind, with many indirect benefits – economic, political and social (which I have tried to discuss). I end by reaffirming our joint commitment to work for basic education for all and the critical importance of freedom from illiteracy and innumeracy.

Literacy as Freedom
Challenging Assumptions and Changing Practice

David Archer, Actionaid UK

Amartya Sen's book, Development as Freedom calls on the world to re-conceive the development process and to place freedom at the centre of our concerns. For Sen, education lies at the heart of this new process, and there is nothing more fundamental in education than literacy – so it is entirely logical to reflect on "Literacy as Freedom". However, to fully understand what this phrase means we must radically expand our horizons, challenging some basic assumptions about "literacy" and developing new approaches. We need to learn from history and take on board this radical new understanding if the new United Nations Literacy Decade is to have more impact than past international attempts to address "literacy".

The written word is immensely powerful. Enabling people to demystify it, access it and use it for their own purposes can be a key ingredient in a wider struggle for social justice. However, if we use the term "literacy" to describe our work, it is important to have some sense of the troubled history of the term because all sorts of prejudices about literacy will be deeply rooted at all levels – in participants, facilitators, trainers, co-ordinators, managers, government officials, non-governmental organization (ngo) staff. The precise prejudices or associations may vary according to the word used in different languages to translate "literacy", but most will be bound up with a dubious history.

1 Literacy and Colonialism
In the era of the British empire "literacy" was seen as a means of inculcating a modern and rational outlook in colonized peoples. As Marc Fiedrich and Anne Jellema note in their research on *Reflect* in Uganda 'Rifles, railways and writing, the British used to boast, were the 3rs of colonial conquest'. Literacy was promoted systematically by Christian missionaries – giving the impression that those who could read the Bible

for themselves would have direct access to the word of God. There was a deep belief in the power of the "Word" and particularly in the printed word. Those who learnt to read and write would, it was thought, develop other skills – a reflective mentality and a capacity for logical or abstract reasoning.

Even the idea of using mass adult education for social change was first developed by colonial administrators. Fiedrich and Jellema quote an official at the Colonial Economic and Development Council in 1948 who noted: 'The key to rapid and effective colonial development is mass adult education; education not just in literacy … but in life – in agriculture, in hygiene, in domestic living, in cultural values, in democratic organization, in self help and so on.'

2 Literacy and Nation Building

After independence new governments also prioritized literacy as a means to build their nations using it to help promote a unitary national identity and to deepen the authority of the state. In communist countries mass literacy was often used as a key part of a larger political or ideological project and was seen as a key indicator of equity and social justice. However, in many cases the association of literacy with the colonial agenda of modernization remained an underlying thread, bringing with it prejudices against, or stereotypes of, those who were "illiterate".

Many governments to this day continue to contribute to these myths about literacy. Government and ngo literacy programmes are still used as a means of disseminating standardized development messages (e.g. on hygiene and health), many of which are largely unchanged since colonial times. By focusing on literacy in this way, governments can perpetuate the myth that poverty is caused by a range of deficiencies in the under-

standing and moral attitudes of the poor – their fatalism, laziness, lack of awareness, high fertility, inability to plan or manage their incomes, for example. Under the rhetoric of promoting social change, most literacy programmes reinforce myths that actually prevent any serious change.

3 Challenging Myths about Literacy

Theorists and academics continued to perpetuate myths about literacy until relatively recently, suggesting a deep gulf between oral and literate cultures. In much of the literature literacy is linked to 'logical and analytical thought, abstract use of language, critical and rational thought, a sceptical and questioning attitude, a distinction between myth and history, the recognition of the importance of time and space, complex and modern governments …' (Fiedrich 2002). Literacy was for years presented as this magic bullet that would solve almost all the ills of the world and single-handedly lead to development, equity and justice.

But this is mostly lies. All of this is premised on a deeply prejudiced, often racist world view, in which the illiterate are regarded as uncivilized. More recent work known as the "new literacy studies" focuses on analysing actual literacy practices showing how they are informed by the context in which they are used. They show that literacy practices vary widely among cultures and individuals. We need to understand what people do with literacy (rather than what literacy does to them). Literacy is not autonomous. It is not a cognitive capacity, nor merely a technical skill. It is not an automatic or direct agent of progress. It is not linked to logical or rational thinking.

4 Implications for Programmes

If you are using a term such as "literacy" to describe your work, you must have a sense of the baggage that it brings. You need to be sensitive to how it will resonate with past uses of the word – and how it will

probably bring forth strong images of formal learning and of a modernization agenda. These will frame the expectations of everyone involved in the process, and if left unquestioned, they may well contradict your wider objectives. This is a particular challenge for participatory approaches which seek to link literacy to empowerment and wider social change.

Probably one of the most widespread participatory approaches to adult literacy is the *Reflect* [1] approach. Although relatively recent in conception,[2] it is now used by over 350 organizations in more than 60 countries. *Reflect* started as an approach to adult literacy, but increasingly practitioners are grappling with the term "literacy" and seeking alternatives. The insights below draw largely on the accumulation of learning by Reflect practitioners linked to the International *Reflect Circle.*

Most significantly in recent *Reflect* practice, the written word is increasingly placed alongside other forms of communication – the spoken word, images and numbers. This does not involve a rejection of literacy but a repositioning of it.[3] If you focus only on the written word you are reinforcing an image of schooling in which literacy is placed on a pedestal and oral or visual communication is relatively disregarded. By focusing on an expanded view – of strengthening peoples' capacity for communication – we can shift expectations and create new images. Even if literacy is a central part of what you wish to (or have to) work on, it can be

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1 reflect (now written *Reflect*) was originally an acronym for Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques. Now practitioners refer to "the *Reflect* approach" or "*Reflect-Action*".

2 *Reflect* was developed by ActionAid through field innovation in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador between 1993 and 1995.

3 The new ways in which *Reflect* practice now addresses literacy can be seen in *Communication and Power: Resource Materials for Reflect Practitioners* to be published in December 2002 by cirac. You can order a copy from the web-site *www.reflect-action.org*

helpful to place this in a wider context. Most people's daily experience of disempowerment is probably not linked to literacy – but rather to situations where the spoken word is the dominant medium – which reinforces the need to address other media of communication.

5 Literacy and Power

The need to place literacy within a wider framework of communication practices does not mean that we should disregard the strong links between literacy and power. The internalized images that we have of literacy help to reinforce these links, so in many contexts the practical use of the written word is closely tied to the practice of power. This may seem a bold assertion – particularly for people in rural areas and marginal urban areas, whose daily life does not depend on or even involve literacy, and where the local school is often an oasis of the written word. However, when the written word appears or is unavoidable it is often associated with situations where power relations are clearly evident. For example, the written word may be strongly associated with the following:

- government power: the maze of bureaucracy involved in dealing with government offices; the forms and procedures people need to deal with; the need to "have all your papers in order" if you wish to access your entitlements or assert your rights with the authorities. Those without proper documentation are effectively illegalized and excluded, making a profound link between literacy and legalisation.

- economic power: the way that landowners, money-lenders, contractors, middle-men, traders, and employers use contracts and documents to justify, to cheat or to assert their power.

- social power: there is almost invariably a strong correlation between level of education/literacy and social status. The way people are perceived and the level to which their word is valued is often linked to literacy. Social stratification is regularly put on public display by the ritual humiliation of requiring people to give thumbprints instead of signatures.

- **political power:** which is often centralized literally in the hand of one person who has the authority to sign or not sign a certain paper. The written manifestos of political parties are routinely paraded as offering binding promises – though rarely is this remotely true.

- **religious power:** particularly in text-based religions like Christianity or Islam where the written word is the word of God the practice of literacy is ritualized and controlled, helping to create the myth that the written word is somehow absolute, conveying a greater truth than the spoken word. Giving a reading in church is often a landmark of social status.

- **civic power:** in rural areas the practice of literacy may be most evident in local civic life – in community organizations and associations or unions, with their minute taking, strict procedures and the importance of doing things "by the book". In largely non-literate communities the secretaries, chairs and treasurers of such organizations are almost invariably the literate few.

- **agency power:** that is, the organization that is implementing any literacy or development programme, for example an ngo. ngos like to construct an image of themselves as invisible, neutral facilitators – when in fact we can be powerful social and economic players in the local environment. This is often evident in the way in which we use literacy. Much of this may be unconscious, but, for example, writing in notebooks, preparing plans, compiling reports, giving out leaflets, carrying briefcases, having pens in our pockets – all these and many other features make us key agents of the power of literacy. How we practice that power and how we practice literacy ourselves will be of critical importance to any wider process we wish to promote.

6 Literacy as Freedom

In all of the different situations in which people need to deal with those who have power, literacy is only a part of a larger equation. Those unable to read are likely to be more intimidated in these situations – but their powerlessness is not just about the lack of a technical skill. It is clearly linked to social status, confidence and self-esteem – and the power dynamics are bound up with a wide range of other forms of communication.

To deal with the power of government offices you need also to be confident to deal with officials in authority who may speak a different language than you. Being able to assert yourself with landowners, employers or contractors requires a complex range of communication skills, not only literacy. The image people portray of themselves, their posture, ability to make eye contact, and other aspects of behaviour are all crucially important when considering social power. Further, the way people talk – and on what subjects – illustrates how much power they feel in different situations. In respect of political power, oral skills carry a huge weight. At election time it is often the style of speaking, rather than what is actually said, which influences people's vote. Political campaigning relies on the power of visual tools, with posters often speaking much louder than words. Religious power in turn is closely linked to the oratory of sermons and to visual imagery or icons. Our own power as organizations is not only manifested in literacy but also in a wider range of oral and visual forms of communication. Our jargon is certainly as much oral as written. Given all these examples it is clear that literacy cannot be treated in isolation and cannot be taught as a technical skill in a classroom detached from the world.

Rather, we need to break with conventional models and introduce new approaches. Real learning will take place through people's practical

engagement with different situations where literacy forms part of a wider power equation in their own environment. Learning needs to be seen as an integral part of a wider process of analysis and action – to help people deal with inequitable power relationships – and to enable them to assert their voice by any means. Giving people the confidence to deal with situations where the written word is used, even if they cannot use it or can do so only at a basic level, without being intimidated, is of huge significance in itself. Overcoming fear and challenging the myths about literacy can become central to enabling people to assert their voices.

Increasingly *Reflect* practitioners therefore start from the wider struggle for freedom – focusing on issues of social, economic and political justice. In that process *Reflect* enables people to start to assume the power of literacy – to deal effectively and without intimidation with those situations where literacy impacts on their lives. Even before people have developed significant technical skills they can make big steps forward in dealing with the power relations in situations where the written word appears. This is crucial because decoding the text (what might be seen as the technical part of learning) is only a small part of what needs to be addressed in any literacy programme which is concerned with increasing freedom.

By starting with a wider process, people's motivation is easily sustained. They do not enter the room with the expectation of assuming a passive role as a pupil. People develop basic literacy through their practice of reflecting on, preparing for and being in situations where it is used. Learning the technical side is after all, not hard. In many *Reflect* programmes participants are now taught to sign their names within the first week – and on the basis of this most groups have the capacity to collectively read almost any document, albeit slowly.

At all times we need to avoid creating the walled mentality of the class-
room. Literacy should never be treated in an abstract way, detached
from daily life and concerns, but should always be integrated to a wider
process of analysis and action. No written texts should be used or pro-
duced that are not immediately meaningful to the group, being part of
their analysis, not apart from it. This means doing away with textbooks
or literacy primers. Instead the generation of basic texts by participants
should structure the process. However external information and themati-
cally relevant "real materials"[4] should of course be introduced and
used to help extend and enrich people's analysis. In this way, writing and
reading should be used as a form of action – as an integral part of pro-
moting greater justice and equity, of asserting rights and securing entitle-
ments, of enriching identity and voice.

Once participants have developed basic skills through such practical
engagement they will doubtlessly find many other uses for the written
word – especially if encouraged by an environment where literacy can
be used in flexible and innovative ways (for example, through promoting
libraries, newspapers, creative writing, opportunities to document local
knowledge). Increasingly access to information and communication tech-
nologies can be an important part of such a process – where these tech-
nologies can strengthen people's voices – whether through radio, televi-
sion, video, computers, megaphones, silk-screen printers or other means.
We will of course never be able to prescribe or anticipate all the uses
that people will find for the written word – but it seems right to start by
helping people deal with those situations where the practice of literacy
and the practice of power are interwoven.

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4 The expression "real materials" refers to
written documents of any kind already
existing in the learners' environment,
in contrast to materials produced
specially for a literacy learning process.

7 Implications for Monitoring

One of the biggest obstacles to change in literacy programmes is the way in which literacy statistics are used at an international level. Most international reports on literacy now start with a cautionary word about the accuracy of the figures used. The draft of the 2002 *Education for All Monitoring Report* is no exception in this, recognizing clearly that the present international data on literacy is unreliable.[5] However, this report follows the pattern of many before it. After a brief acknowledgement of the flimsiness of the statistics, any doubts are rapidly forgotten and precise figures are routinely quoted – such that we forget their inaccuracy and create the illusion that we do know or understand the situation – when this is so far from the truth.

We need much better literacy assessment if we are to dispel past myths and promote new conceptions of literacy that capture the links between literacy and power, or literacy and freedom. There are some initiatives underway to work towards this, for example, looking at different types of reading and domains of print, but none seems to go far enough. The quest for international comparability drives a tendency to reduce literacy to the neutralized technical skills of reading, writing and calculating. This sustains the myth that literacy is something that can be easily measured in and of itself – and this in turn perpetuates the myth that adult literacy can be addressed in isolation.

This ignores almost all the insights from recent theoretical and practical experience in literacy, trampling over any understanding of literacies and the importance of cultural diversity. Literacy will mean different things in different places, and in any one context there will be multiple forms

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5 unesco. 2002. *Monitoring Report on Education for All.* Paris: unesco.

of literacy. Being able to deal with one form of literacy does not give an automatic passport to others. Literacy events are never purely to do with literacy, but are rather interwoven with other forms of communication – oral, non-verbal, perhaps visual. People's capacity to deal with them is not just about decoding, but about social confidence, overcoming intimidation or dealing with power relationships.

If literacy should not be de-contextualized then any meaningful measures of literacy must be determined in each context. There must be clear recognition of the social, economic and political conditions as well as social expectations. The measure should really be one that looks at people's capacity to participate actively in society, dealing with the forms of literacy which are necessary, for example, to assert their rights, access their entitlements, function socially, find information when they need it, or pursue a sustainable livelihood. This depends not just on people's capacities but also on the nature of the society in which they live.

Rather than imposing some international norms, the focus should be on supporting national level processes and debates in each country – encouraging an analysis both of people's literacies and of the demands of society. We should promote an open public debate at the national (and even local) level in each country to discuss what literacy means and to explore appropriate measures of it. A limited number of domains may be prioritized – reflecting those domains that are significant for wider development and social justice, for example, looking at people's capacity to assert their rights, access entitlements, function socially, pursue sustainable livelihoods, or support children's school-work. Prioritizing a public debate on literacy in this way in each country might lead to serious

reflection and action as much around people's right to information and the changes needed to promote social inclusion, as around promoting learning. This is precisely the sort of multi-pronged initiative that is required to have a major impact on literacy.

There are some new international initiatives for assessing literacy – which start with a base of recognizing diversity – but they always seem to end up with a new standardization of generic literacy-testing instruments. I believe we should go further, encouraging and supporting national level processes of re-defining literacy and developing national systems to measure it appropriately. It would still be possible to compile international statistics – ones which show a more complex picture of people's literacies in relation to the literacies that they need in *their* society, around a limited number of key development domains. The outcome may be that some countries emerge with poor results if information about basic rights and entitlements were not easily accessed, understood or applied. Such a country in turn might make significant improvements by enhancing the accessibility of these – using diverse media, simple language, democratic reforms – as much as by promoting a narrow learning of literacy. The literacy statistics would then measure something much more cross-cutting and more meaningful.

8 The United Nations Literacy Decade: A New Start?
In the *World Forum on Education for All* at Dakar in 2000, it was agreed that the focus for moving forward must be national-level processes (rather than international ones). As such it would be appropriate for the Literacy Decade to start by promoting national-level debate on literacy, facilitating everywhere a re-think of what people mean by the term, challenging old myths and looking at the relations between people and their national society. The Literacy Decade should refuse to reinforce the

archaic concepts and unhelpful inheritance of the past. It would certainly have more effect by challenging some of the basic assumptions around literacy than by perpetuating myths and repeating lies.

In summary, the biggest problem with literacy lies with the very discourse around literacy and this is reinforced greatly when we imagine that it is something that can be measured in standardized forms across countries. Realistic multi-pronged strategies that link literacy to sustainable livelihoods and to people's assertion of their rights will not be developed whilst this discourse is perpetuated. The Literacy Decade should break the mould and develop a more coherent discourse and a new, more questioning approach. If it does not we are likely to end up with more huge government programmes that deal with "literacy" only in the bounded artificial walls of a classroom – programmes which have failed in the past and will fail in the future – and programmes which have very little to do with increasing justice or equity.

This is a wonderful opportunity to support new, innovative work that builds on diverse national and local realities and responds to the real complexities of the links between communication and power. This decade must support new forms of partnership between governments and civil society organizations, generating critical reflection and more holistic approaches to adult learning, linking learning to wider social, economic and political change. There is an urgent need for new energy in this field and unesco could play a key role as a catalyst to release that energy.

9 Concluding Propositions

- We cannot link literacy to freedom when "literacy" as a concept is itself so un-free. We need to break the chains that bind literacy to colonial prejudice and narrow-minded thinking – and we must stop the forms of measurement of literacy that keep it in those chains. Whilst literacy is locked away in an isolated cell we will never see its real living, breathing, complex form.

- The United Nations Literacy Decade should open up fundamental debates about literacy rather than keeping those debates closed. It should be an opportunity for a fresh start where we can look critically at the inheritance and take new directions.[6]

- We need to increase support massively for adult literacy programmes – but only where these address literacy in the wider context of other communication practices and are clearly oriented at helping people achieve greater justice and equity.

- There needs to be a clear shift away from the teaching of literacy as a technical skill in a classroom and towards focusing on supporting approaches that enable people to use literacy in real situations, particularly where it is linked to the practice of power. A critical group process of reflection-action-reflection is central to this.

- Literacy should not be mythologised and indeed every opportunity should be taken to challenge existing myths. We should promote critical debate and reflection around literacy with learners, facilitators, trainers, co-ordinators, government officials, national ministers and the general public.

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6 Further critical reflections on literacy can be found in Fiedrich, Mark and Anne Jellema. Forthcoming. *Literacy,* *Gender and Social Agency: Adventures in Empowerment.* London: dfid.

How to Eradicate Illiteracy without Eradicating Illiterates?

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Introduction

This paper is a personal testimony of part of my story with language, literacy, and knowledge. During the first half of my life, I – like most educated people – approached life from a standpoint superior to that of the 'elements' themselves (people, things, social relations, and phenomena). I started with official and professional texts, concepts and theories, standardized measures and ready meanings – the approach followed by institutions in general and by the educational institution in particular. In the second 30 years of my life, I have been trying to listen to the elements in my surroundings, including my inner voice and the voice of nature. In other words, I have been busy healing myself from the assumption that thinking is superior or higher than living or doing. Being attentive to my surroundings and faithful to my experiences and inner voice, and using words rather than be used by them, became main guiding principles for me.

In those second 30 years of my life, I became increasingly aware and cautious of the role of universal thinking, solutions, claims and declarations, of dominant forms of knowledge, and of texts in contributing to the disappearance of diversity, and to the dominance of one path for progress and development. To define people in negative terms is part of the problem with the dominant discourse. To define a person, for example, as 'illiterate' (i.e. in terms of what she/he lacks instead of what the person has and what she/he does) is one striking example relevant to the discussion here. That illiterate person can have tremendous knowledge, wisdom and can express herself/himself in various beautiful ways. Yet all that is ignored and what she/he lacks is stressed. It is a very effective way of using language to control what the mind sees and what it fails to see. If it were only about the term 'illiterate', I would not have mentioned it. I was defined, along with my people, by negative terms throughout my

whole life, and very rarely – if ever – by what we are and what we have. We were defined as 'non-Jews', even when we formed the majority in Palestine. (It is like defining the French in France as 'non-Algerians'!) And at least since 1949, we, along with 80 per cent of the population of the world, were defined as undeveloped or underdeveloped or developing. In spite of this, I will use the term 'illiterate' to point out its absurdity and to relate what I am saying in this paper to current discussions on the topic.

A good part of this paper consists of comparing two worlds: the world of my illiterate mother and the world of my literate self. My fascination with this comparison has been a main inspiring element in my thinking and doing for the past 25 years at least. I am still fascinated by my mother's world, her way of living, understanding, knowing, relating and expressing. She continues to be an invincible treasure for me every time I find myself in a situation where I need to look at things in a way different from the norm, where I need to imagine a different way of perceiving, as in the current situation concerning the call to celebrate literacy. I find my imagination, in such situations, wandering back to her, because she was a true embodiment of a radically different worldview. That is why when I hear a person, or read a statement, which implies that the illiterate is not a full human being, and that we need to save her/him, I shiver inside, and feel the urgency for a new vision touching the core of what is real. In addition to comparing the two worlds, I will describe some projects that I was involved in during the past 30 years which embodied the approach, principles and convictions which I lived by and worked with concerning language, literacy and knowledge.

The first articulation of this relationship appeared in an article I wrote in 1990.[1] My 'discovery' of my illiterate mother's mathematics, and how my mathematics and knowledge could neither detect nor comprehend her mathematics and knowledge, mark the biggest turning point in my life. They have had the greatest impact on my perception of knowledge, language, and their relationship to reality. Later, I realized that the invisibility of my mother's mathematics was not an isolated matter but a reflection of a wide phenomenon related to the dominant Western worldview. Bernal and Black (1987)[2] challenge the whole basis of our thinking about the question: what is classical about classical civilization? Classical civilization, they argue, has deep roots in Afroasiatic cultures, which have been systematically ignored, denied or suppressed since the eighteenth century - chiefly for racist reasons. Development during the past 50 years has been a continuation of this ignoring, denial, and suppression of what peoples and cultures had throughout history, and still have.

The first Palestinian *Intifada*, which started in December 1987, deepened and broadened many of the convictions, which started growing within me during the 1970s. It made me aware of cultural and social aspects that were also made invisible by dominant structures and terminology. During the first *Intifada*, I realized that what kept Palestinian society viable were people who are rooted in the soil of the culture and in daily lives, whether literate or not. It was the rooted traditions and social structures that kept the various communities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip functioning. In other words, the crucial factor in whether a person is nurturing the community and nurtured by it is not whether one is literate or not, but whether one is rooted in the cultural soil and in daily

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1 'Community Education is to Reclaim and Transform What Has Been Made Invisible,' in the Harvard Educational Review Feb. 1990.

2 See, for example, Martin Bernal, Athena Black : The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985, Rutgers University Press, 1987.

living or not. For me, the challenge facing communities everywhere, is to reclaim and revalue the diverse ways of learning, studying, knowing, relating, doing, and expressing. My first reaction to the *Intifada*, in relation to language, was to work with students from Birzeit University,[3] where I asked them to read the front pages of newspapers and write about them, comparing the titles with what was written below the titles and with what was happening on the ground. However, the biggest project I was involved in as a result of the *Intifada*, and related to language and literacy, was launching the reading campaign in Palestinian society as a main project of Tamer Institute, which I established in Palestine in 1989.[4] Since 1997, I have been involved with two projects *The Arab Education Forum* and the *Qalb el-Umour* Project, both of which embody a different perception, conception, practice, and "myths" concerning learning and the use of language.

Before ending these preliminary remarks, I would like to make a comment on the round-table. Although the round-table occurs as we celebrate Literacy Day, I have a problem with celebrating a tool, especially in a world where tools, particularly language, are used to control, suppress, and distort. Celebrating literacy is like celebrating cars. When we look at what cars have done to ancient and great cities like Cairo and Athens, we realize that we need to be more careful. In other words, we need to look not only at what literacy adds in the way it is conceived and implemented, but also at what it subtracts or makes invisible.

In short, my bias in this paper is obvious: my concern is not about statistical measures – for example, how many learn the alphabet – but about

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3 We met 'illegally', because Birzeit, along with other Palestinian universities and schools, was closed by Israel.

4 For details, see my article 'The Reading Campaign Experience within Palestinian Society: Innovative Strategies for Learning and Building Community,' Harvard Educational Review, Feb. 1995.

our perception of the learner and what happens to her/him in the process of learning the alphabet. My concern is to make sure that the learner does not lose what she/he already has; that literacy does not replace other forms of learning, knowing, and expressing; that literacy is not considered superior to other forms; and that the learner uses the alphabet rather than be used by it. In other words, my concern is to make sure that in the process of eradicating illiteracy, we do not crush illiterates. In this paper, I stress aspects that are usually not stressed in discussions and programmes on literacy. There is no need to repeat things that have been stressed before.

The Story of my 'Illiterate' Mother

In the 1970s, while I was working in schools and universities in the West Bank region in Palestine and trying to make sense out of mathematics, science and knowledge, I discovered that what I was looking for had been next to me, in my own home: my mother's mathematics and knowledge. She was a seamstress. Women would bring to her rectangular pieces of cloth in the morning; she would take a few measurements with coloured chalk; by noon each rectangular piece would be cut into 30 small pieces; and by the evening these scattered pieces would be connected to form a new and beautiful whole. If this is not mathematics, I do not know what mathematics is. The fact that I could not see it for 35 years made me realize the power of language in what we see and what we do not see. Her knowledge was embedded in life, like salt in food, in a way that made it invisible to me as an educated and literate person. I was trained to see things through official language and professional categories. In a very true sense, I discovered that my mother was illiterate in relation to my type of knowledge, but I was illiterate in terms of her type of understanding and knowledge. Thus, to describe her as illiterate and me as literate, in some absolute sense, reflects a narrow and distorted

view of the real world and of reality. I am illiterate among the indigenous peoples in Ecuador; a Greek is illiterate in Pakistan; and so on. A division, which I find more significant than literate and illiterate, would be between people whose words are rooted in the cultural-social soil in which they live – like real flowers – and people who use words that may look bright and shiny but without roots – just like plastic flowers. Put differently, a serious challenge, which we face in today's world, is for each person, whether literate or illiterate, 'to say what one means and mean what one says,' a statement, which is alien to institutional logic and to career-oriented professionals.[5]

The realization of my mother's knowledge challenged several assumptions which are usually embedded in official discussions on literacy: that a literate person is better than an illiterate person; that an illiterate person is not a full human being; that she/he is ignorant; that by becoming literate, a person is magically transformed and poverty and ignorance would be wiped out; that a literate person is freer than an illiterate person; and so on. The fact is that my illiterate mother was neither inferior in her knowledge nor was less human or less free. Thus, giving literacy magical powers and claims is simply a false promise.

My engagement with my mother was neither objective nor subjective, although it included elements of both. My engagement with her touched the depth of my intimate convictions and beliefs. The dialogue between her worldview and mine helped me to remove many masks, which I had acquired through my education. It was not easy for me to take them off. It took me several years before I was able to admit my new convictions publicly. I was simply risking my career, prestige and reputation.

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5 I hope that one day the United Nations declares a decade where people say during that decade what they mean and mean what they say. That would, in my opinion, have a real and deep impact on reversing the disastrous logic which currently runs the world.

At one point, I really thought that what was needed to make my mother understand mathematics better was to teach her how to read and write, to teach her some accepted terminology and ways of the dominant mathematics. I thought if I only could teach her how to put what she knew in terms of the categories which I studied and taught, then her knowledge would be much better. I thought that if I could mix her mathematics with mine, I might come up with something fantastic. Gradually, however, I realized that her knowledge and mine could not be mixed; it would be like mixing real flowers with plastic flowers – her knowledge being the real flowers. Her knowledge cannot be taught or transmitted by ways, methods, categories, and language, which I studied and was teaching. At the same time, I realized that my kind of knowledge could not be integrated into life the way hers was. I do not like the term empowerment, but if I allow myself to use it I would say that I was empowered by my mother rather than the other way round, although current wisdom has it that my mother needed empowerment. I realized that what I really could do was to articulate my realization of her knowledge and make it visible to the world of the literate, hoping that we learn how to be humble again and become aware of the diversity of ways of learning, knowing, perceiving, living, and expressing – and that such ways cannot be compared along linear measures. I articulated my realization of her knowledge hoping that we stop making universal claims such as 'literacy does wonders' without many and severe qualifications, and also hoping that we realize again that diversity is in the nature of life and, thus stop claiming that there is only one path for learning, knowing and for progress, namely education. My hope was, and still is, to end the monopoly of education over learning and regain diverse 'spaces', along with resources, where people learn. Put differently, education is one way to learn; those who are comfortable with it should be supported. Those who are comfortable with other ways of learning should also

be supported by providing them with the means and the facilities, including resources, that help them learn. This implies an end to the era of *Education for All* and, instead, provide diverse ways of learning where we do not produce credentialed but useless people, including dropouts, and blame them for it. This is very relevant to the literacy efforts that are currently being launched.

Literacy as Freedom?

Since freedom is the main theme of the round-table, it merits some elaboration before I discuss its relation to literacy. For me, the most fundamental aspect of freedom is making one's path in life by walking it. Freedom is not choosing between path x and path y although it can embody this aspect. And it is not following a predetermined path. It does not refer to freedom of choice and of decision, although it embodies both. "Making a path in life by walking it" implies being attentive to and acknowledging reality, and also being faithful to one's experiences of that reality and to one's convictions and principles. In this sense, we are all co-partners in understanding reality; each person is a source of understanding. We are all doers, observers, and constructors and authors of reality. Understanding reality does not have one author but many, as many as those who care to put an effort to independently investigate meaning of life and words. No one has the right or authority to monopolize interpretations and meanings. Personal interpretation and independent investigation of meaning are, for me, most fundamental human rights (which, ironically, are not mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights!). In addition, personal interpretation and independent investigation of meaning are among the most fundamental characteristics of freedom. They respond to free interaction and honest reflection between the world within the person and the world around the person.

Personal interpretation and independent investigation of meaning, how-ever, embody responsibility on our part and, thus, embody risk. This is where freedom, responsibility, commitment and readiness to pay a price converge. In this sense, freedom can neither start with models nor follow predetermined patterns nor be measured, but it can be inspired by the lives of others.

In the sense described above, I feel that my 'illiterate' mother was much freer than me. She made her path in life by walking it, and not by being trained nor by fragmenting knowledge and teaching them to her separated from life. She learned rather than was taught. She learned by observing, doing, reflecting, relating, and producing. She created her own path and constructed her own understanding. One big difference between my mother and me is that if I needed to find the meaning of a word I would look it up in a dictionary, encyclopaedia or some other book. In contrast, she would look for meanings through her experiences and life. My way was the lazy way. I would rarely bother to put any effort to explore the meaning by reflecting on my experience with the word; no independent investigation of meaning. She was authoring her understanding. She was a spectator, a doer, and an author of reality. In contrast, I was an imitator, solving problems, most of which have been solved for a trillion times, in boring repetition in schools around the world for the past 100 years at least. A typical question in my type of education was "what are the dimensions of the biggest box we can make out of a rectangular piece of board?" A typical challenge for my mother was, "how to make a beautiful dress out of a rectangular piece of cloth, that would fit a particular person." In addition, she was free in the sense of not being bound to an institution to give her a job. Her knowl-edge sprang from life and was connected to life. She was needed every-where she lived. She was her own boss. She was free from the fear of los-

ing her job, or of being labelled by an arbitrary committee that she was not fit for the job. Freedom from fear is another fundamental aspect of freedom. She was free from the hegemony of institutions and professionals. Unlike teachers, trainers, experts, and the like, her commitment was not to institutions and professionals; she did not need them to get legitimacy. Her commitment was to people whom she cared about, many of whom became her friends. In contrast, my knowledge originated in institutions and needed institutions. Moreover, having a curriculum and constantly feeling fearful of failing or being accused of one thing or another, contradict freedom in the sense described above.

One objection that could be presented here is that knowing how to read and write can help people be free in terms of not depending on others in 'moving around' in the modern world. True, but my main point in this paper is exactly this: how to gain this kind of freedom without losing other kinds, which in my opinion are extremely crucial?

An Analogy

I will use cars to clarify what I want to say here. In imitation of the word 'illiterate', I will use the term 'car-less' to define people who have no cars. Instead of talking about such people as those who walk, those who use what is abundant and healthy (legs), we stress what they don't have. In some sense, a person who has a car is freer to go to more places, and to places farther away, but she/he is bound to drive on pre-paved roads. She/he may have several roads to choose from, but they are all predetermined, pre-constructed. It is much harder to make one's own path using a car. 'Car-less' people (just like 'illiterate' people) probably cover less area, but are freer to move around and explore the surroundings. They make their paths by walking. Their feet are always on the ground. Seeing the landscape from the window of a car (or from a plane) gives the

illusion that the person is learning about the landscape but it is totally different from walking on and feeling the soil, the plants, the fresh air, nature's sounds, and so on. Some may say why not have both? Fine, as long as using cars (or planes) is not considered superior and more valuable than walking, and as long as we do not lose the ability to reach places or to realize aspects of life where cars and language cannot reach. It is very hard to be wise if you travel all the time in cars or planes. In contrast, it is very hard for a farmer, a sailor, a true scientist, a true artist, or a traveller on foot not to be wise. Wisdom is listening to and being attentive to nature and surroundings. It does not consider increasing the speed of life as a main goal or value. Gandhi, who is considered wise by many, once said, "There is more to life than increasing its speed."

Considering reading and writing as a basic human need often robs people of what I consider to be more basic, which is the ability to express one's living in some form, which for many may not be language and literacy. If we can provide literacy for all without robbing them of what they have, that is fine. Since resources are limited and our ways are often exclusive, it only makes sense to provide various options for people to choose from. The expression of my mother's knowledge, for example, took the form of beautiful clothes. That of a farmer is what she/he grows. And so on. To claim that literacy is more important for my mother does not make sense. If one can acquire an expression without losing another, that is fine, but if for some reason one has to choose, then claiming that literacy is the only or the best choice for all cannot be justified. To put all our energies and resources in one form limits diversity and freedom.

The teachers I still remember fondly were not those who were trained well, and who possessed technical knowledge and advanced degrees, but

those who were generous and hospitable. They were generous in their spirit, and with their time and with their ears, that is, compassionate listeners. They were hospitable in their attitude and relationships, and with their hearts and minds. They accepted not only what was familiar but also what sounded strange – hospitality is true when it is extended to strangers, and not only to those whom we know. They were open to strange ideas, never judgmental, and had big hearts. My mother was such a teacher. She was not a certified professional teacher; she was a profound human being. She was generous, hospitable, kind, caring and wise. In addition, she was doing something artistic and pleasing to her. She was not an educator or facilitator or liberator or conscientizor or any of these terms that are good in the world of control and consumption, where people are divided into 'helpless' and 'saviours'. She was truthful, she did what she believed in, and I never heard her say anything she didn't mean – she would rather remain silent. Her way of living was compelling enough that people were affected. She never preached. Rather, she lived the principles she believed in, those that she wished for the community. There was no separation between her words and her actions. When she used the word love, for example, her actions already preceded her words. I never felt she was competing with anyone. She was doing things out of personal conviction, of inner calling. Through her way of living and relating, and through her perceptions, she helped me heal from a lot of the aspects of being literate. I am still literate, but I will not do what I did blindly before. For example, I abandoned many words that I used before healing, such as progress, success, failure, and measuring people. I suggest we allot some time where we celebrate the knowledge and wisdom of my 'illiterate' mother, and all the 'illiterate' people who have no interest in the system of control and winning. It is worth mentioning here that I am not talking about my mother as an exceptional and extraordinary person. I believe deep inside that all those who are

labelled illiterate have special and wonderful qualities about them. I certainly encourage any one who lives with an 'illiterate' to dig into the treasure inside and bring it out.

Any attempt to uproot people like my mother from their cultural soil and put them in plastic frames or boxes, whether in the name of literacy or development or whatever, is an attempt that we should eye with caution. We have to look at what we lose in any process and not only at what we gain. The challenge is how a person like my mother can become literate, without losing the tremendous knowledge, self-confidence, and wisdom that she/he has.

Learning from Projects

Many projects that I started and worked on during the past 25 years sprang from the realization of what my mother embodied, and after 1987, from the inspiration created by the first Palestinian *intifada*. These projects included teaching mathematics to illiterate workers at Birzeit University in the late 1970s, encouraging students to use their experiences in redefining terms in my classes, experimenting with community education (such as launching a reading campaign in Palestine) through Tamer Institute, encouraging people to articulate what they do through the Arab Education Forum, and creating spaces for young people to express, exchange and discuss, as in the *Qalb el-Umour* project. I will touch briefly on these projects.

When Birzeit was closed by Israel in the late 1970s, I decided to teach mathematics to illiterate workers at the University. I did not start logically by first teaching them numbers and numerals, but by choosing tasks that they were doing more or less daily. I will choose two examples. Every day they came to the University from their homes. So I asked

them to draw the road from their homes to the University. The second example was about arranging chairs in big rooms and halls. Because the University was small at the time, many rooms and halls were used for multiple purposes. My question was to find out how many chairs could fit a certain hall before they started moving the chairs. That required various dimensions related to mathematics and language, such as drawing a map of the hall, showing the tiles, counting and writing the symbols of numbers and writing words. That question took several days of discussion and covered several aspects. In short, I used what they did daily in building knowledge of the alphabet and numerical literacy.

As for redefining terms and building one's own understanding, I devised a course for first year students at Birzeit University in 1979, which I called *mathematics in the other direction* and wrote a book with the same title in Arabic.

The Reading Campaign

When we launched the reading campaign in Palestine at Tamer Institute for Community Education in February 1992, its main objective was to make reading into a habit and reading books an enjoyable activity within the Palestinian community at large. This was recently extended to Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. It did not attempt to deal with illiteracy in a literal sense, because we felt that literacy is not only the technical knowledge of how to read and write, but is rather having the ability and means to learn and produce. Thus, the activities of the reading promotion campaign focused on helping people acquire these means to learn, mainly the ability to work within a small group, dialogue, and reflect on one's actions through writing and discussion. Regardless of whether one was 'literate' or 'illiterate', the atmosphere was such that everyone wanted to be involved in reading whether through the literal

reading of books or listening to books being read or contributing to the writing and documentation of one's life experiences.

The essence of the Arab Education Forum is inviting every person or group that is doing something which is inspired from within, as opposed to doing some repetitious meaningless job, to reflect on what she/he does and express and share it with others. Although we describe the initiatives as inspiring, yet we do not put ourselves as judges to exclude any one from such reflection, expression and sharing. This includes both literate and illiterate people. We consider every person as a source of understanding and every experience as having value which can be brought out and shared. The responsibility is totally at the personal or local group level.

The example of *Qalb el-Umour* magazine: Although it is not strictly teaching the alphabet, it is an example of how to use the alphabet rather than be used by it – a crucial distinction in relation to literacy. Any group of friends – regardless of age, background, geographical location – can get together, express aspects of their lives, and pull together some resources and produce an issue of the magazine. The idea is built on the fact that what is needed to produce an issue is available to any group: their stories, expressions, will, and their collective decision to produce it. It is built on what is available, what people have, in abundance. No one approves, and no one edits. In other words, language in the magazine is considered a tool for freedom, expressing what exists inside the person and the interaction of what is inside with one's surrounding, and not a tool which is used to evaluate children through words such as right and wrong. There is no professional editor to edit their writings, but we encourage them to share what they write with one another, and if as a result of discussions, they feel they want to make changes, that is fine.

But no one has the authority to correct another. They can use any language or any tool of expression, such as videos and drawings, they feel comfortable with to express aspects of their lives that they would like to share with others. If the group does not have access to a typewriter or a computer, they are encouraged to write their pieces in their own handwriting, which actually happened in some places. There is no monopoly in the magazine on who can write and who cannot, and no exclusion of people who do not write 'correctly'. People who are engaged in producing an issue enjoy the blessing of their natural ability to work together, act, reflect, express, read, converse, study, communicate, learn from one another, and produce – in freedom, dignity, openness, and honesty. No fears, no judgments and no evaluations along 'objective' or universal professional measures, and no story that is not valuable to be expressed. In two years, more than 20 issues were produced in several Arab countries, and others were produced in Boston (usa), Iran and Udaipur (India). The essence of *Qalb el-Umour* is for people, in small groups, to look at their lives as the subject of reflection, expression and action and to take responsibility in doing something about their lives and their surroundings, and to share that with others. In other words, listening to one's inner voice, building one's inner world, stitching the social fabric of the community, being attentive to one's surrounding and feeling a sense of responsibility to do what needs to be done, and being honest in one's expression are guiding principles and convictions in the project. 'Aliveness' is a natural accompaniment of this process.

The Trouble with Literacy
The biggest problem with literacy is substituting words for life, and considering concepts more real than reality. Concepts and professional and scientific terms are often treated as being more real than reality. I participated recently in a symposium where 50 presidents, vice presi-

dents, and rectors from various universities in Eastern and Western Europe and the us gathered to talk about how they manage their universities. Instead of starting by each one describing how she/he manages hishe/her university, participants had to start with the concept of autonomy. The concept became the real thing, more real than the diverse realities in the various universities. What was taking place in the various universities had to be squeezed and measured according to this concept, as developed in America, and to a lesser extent, in Western European countries.

I mentioned earlier that one big difference between my mother and me is that if I needed to find the meaning of a word I would look it up in a dictionary or similar source. In contrast, she would look for meanings of words in her experiences and life. Literacy deepens the habit of learning about the world rather than from the world. My mother learned from the world. I learned about the world, often artificial and fabricated aspects of the world.

Learning how to read and write can help a person be free. However, I also believe that it often happens that there is a need for a literate person to free herself/ himself from the hegemony and tyranny of words. It is crucial to have a new look at literacy in a world which is marching fast towards catastrophes that are created mainly by literate people, such as polluting air, land and ocean; controlling minds and creating tools of total destruction.

In one of unesco's publications on literacy, I read the following statement, " … the goal is to liberate 100s of millions of our fellow citizens by getting them to learn to read and then to keep on reading." What about the huge number of people who do not like to read and, instead,

like to do something else which to them is more pleasing and which nurtures them daily? Can we conclude that there is something wrong with them and they have to be forced to learn how to read and go on reading?! This is my main point in this paper: if somebody does not like to read and write, we should not conclude that there is something wrong with them.

With texts forming the main tool in education, our minds become what my friend Gustavo Esteva and his colleagues refer to as 'textual minds', rendering them uprooted and homeless. If we look seriously at the history of education since its conception 500 years ago, or the history of the age of development since its declaration by Truman 53 years ago, or the history of human rights since its adoption, we will not rush into advocating them blindly. It is urgent to rethink such tools, which we have been taking for granted. Stressing rights, for example, helped change people from feeling responsible and free to act into people who constantly complain and demand. We need to be intellectually honest if the path towards catastrophes, which we witness in today's world, is going to be turned around; we need to rethink anything that claims to be universal. Universalism, more than anything else, has been a main cause in killing diversity, which, in my opinion, is the essence of life. This path towards catastrophes is mainly the making of fully literate people, armed with science and technology. Nothing, for example, has done as much irreversible harm, in terms of polluting the human body, food and nature, as the science of chemistry during the past 100 years!

There are some strange beliefs that are held by literate people, such as that most children do not like to learn unless forced – hence, compulsory education. It is like saying that fishes do not like to swim unless forced. John Holt put it nicely, 'Fish swim, birds fly, and people learn.' Learning

is the natural accompaniment of living. We need to make education compulsory and force children to go to school because what is presented at school is not interesting, to say the least. And if some schools can make it interesting, with such facilities as swimming pools and gym halls, the tuition usually skyrockets! 'People don't learn unless taught' may be true about technical skills.

Let me give another example of how literate people can be blind. After 50 years of turning most societies into socio-economic ruins, development still is regarded, mainly by literate people, as freedom and as a dream! Much of the disruption and destruction in many countries was due to development programmes and policies. What happened in Argentina recently, and what happened in Brazil in the seventies, and what happened to many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa during the past 50 years, are direct outcomes of development. Such outcomes can be invisible to the literate mind, because there are many publications and experts who still claim that development is good. In texts, we have many stories of success. It is easy to lie with words. On the ground, however, we have hardly any example where diversity was not killed, where ways of living were not crushed, where communities did not become fragmented and totally dependent on the mercy of the outside. Development in most countries was like aids: it killed their natural immune systems and exposed them to all kinds of social and economic ills.

We can only teach by doing and loving what we do, by embodying in our lives what we want to teach. We teach honesty by being honest; language, by using it creatively and meaningfully; science, by constantly observing, questioning and doing.

Controlling minds through what is sometimes referred to as 'mother tongue' is not a fantasy or fiction. It is history. It was dug out and told by Ivan Illich in his book *Shadow Work*. Very briefly, the story goes like this: at the same time Columbus went to Queen Isabella and presented his plan to extend her rule and control over new lands, another man, with the name of Nabrija, went to her and presented a plan to control her people within the boundaries of her country. He told the ambitious queen that the way to control her subjects' minds was by teaching them one official language, which later was referred to as 'mother tongue', and making sure that those who speak differently feel embarrassed or diminished. He had two books ready for the language he forged from various languages that were spoken at the time in Spain: a dictionary and a grammar book. To her credit, Isabella told him he must be out of his mind to try to force a whole nation to speak exactly the same language, with the same meanings. Nabrija's ideas had to wait another 150 years, when the French picked them up to help establish the French state and French education. Britain, Sweden, and other European countries soon followed.

As a literate person, whenever I wanted to say something, I searched for the right words in my mental dictionary, my memory, for words and ideas that I stored there. My mother seemed to be much more spontaneous and honest in her expressions. As an illiterate person, she searched in her experiences to guide her to the words that best would say what she wanted to say. She looked for elements and referents in her surroundings and experiences, and chose the words that would express most honestly what she wanted to say.

The tool of the alphabet reduced me to a person able to work mainly through texts. My mind and my thinking, and the terms I used and their

meanings, were confined mainly to textbooks which I studied and taught. Discovering my mother's mathematics and knowledge helped me discover how deeply my knowledge was anchored in textbooks, how much my mind was pulled away from life and shaped by words – first during my studies, then later during my teaching. I realized how much the shape of the concept (the written word) dominated my thinking and perception; how I often behaved as if the concept, the shape, and what they referred to, are the same; and how I unconsciously transmitted that to my students. I would like to stress that I am not talking here about reading books, which brings tremendous enjoyment and lets the mind and the imagination wander into all kinds of worlds; I am talking here about textbooks and taught language.

I started realizing that, yes, there is oppression of all kinds around me: political, military, social, and economic. However, becoming aware of my mother's knowledge helped me realize the oppression caused through literacy, through being confined in my knowledge and learning to texts. In the 1970s, I used language as a tool of freeing the minds by seeing alternatives and breaking the hegemony of universal meanings. Soon, however, I realised that there were limits to this function of language. Language is limited in terms of understanding. The fact is that we experience much more than we can understand through the mind, and we understand much more than we can express through language.

Education has transformed knowledge and learning into commodities, and students and teachers into consumers. I feel that we need to make sure that we don't repeat the same pattern in literacy programmes – during the literacy decade and beyond.

What to Do?

Just like any other tool, the impact of literacy depends on the values that govern the society in which it is launched. This is hardly ever mentioned, although it forms, in my opinion, the most important factor in how literacy affects people and to what ends it is employed. Since the main values that govern modern institutions and professionals are winning, control and separation from life, it follows that literacy would mainly serve these values, which would mean, in practice, that it would help transform people into better consumers and competitors, and into becoming more individualistic and detached from real life.

From this it follows that the first and most important step for any group that wants to be involved in working on literacy or to launch a literacy project is to discuss the values that they would like to be guided by in their community. Luckily, since the worlds of the illiterates are usually governed by values that are more human than winning, control, and individualism, there is a better chance to raise the issue of values in such communities.

The second step, which follows from the first, is for each group to decide for itself what meaning it adopts for literacy, what meaning it wants to embody in its work and its thought. We cannot impose one meaning for all. Thirdly, we need to abandon universal solutions that will fit all, which legitimizes their imposition on people, usually in the name of progress, development and empowerment. It is inhuman and disruptive.

One strong conviction that grew within me over the years is that a need which is more basic than knowing how to read and write is to have at least one ability or form in which the person is able to express himself/herself. Some would choose reading and writing. Others, however, may

choose other forms. To force one form on all is not only oppressive and disregarding of people's diverse ways, but also robs people of what they like to do and how they like to learn and express themselves. Moreover, forcing one form, in this case literacy, naturally leads to discriminate against those who do not like this form. It would lead to treating an illiterate person as less, not fully, human.

We need to live with new myths and assumptions. First and foremost, we need to realize that every person is a source of knowledge and understanding. One of the biggest resistances that I had in working with mathematics teachers is to accept that there is no child who is not logical. We also need to stop equating illiteracy with ignorance. Believing that there are people who are ignorant or illogical is itself an ignorant and illogical belief.

Liberation and freedom are linked to diversity and pluralism. Thus, freedom from universals is crucial to any concept of freedom. We need a decade to celebrate the diversity which exists in learning, knowing and expressing; a decade that reminds us that learning happens through doing and interacting with as many elements as possible in one's surroundings, including books. Freedom is connected to being honest and faithful to our experiences and inner voices. If literacy is going to be for freedom it cannot be taught, using dominant ways.

The decade for literacy, like *Education for All*, is a call for one treatment for all! What is needed is spaces, opportunities, facilities, and resources for people to develop their expressions, that is, to do, in terms of expression, what they already do, but constantly better. To develop the means in which they already express themselves or they would like to express themselves. This is a much more human and real need than literacy for

all. If, for example, a person is a storyteller, her/his need is more for developing that ability. If a person is a *dabke* (Arab dance) dancer or a *tableh* (musical instrument) player, it would make more sense to develop that. I say this because resources are limited. Putting our limited resources in one form of expression and communication, and to impose it, cannot be viewed as totally innocent. What is desperately needed is to regain a pluralist attitude, through which we again respect radically different ways of living, knowing, and expressing. What people need is to be provided with spaces and facilities, including resources, from which they can choose. It is not a good idea to repeat the practice of education where students are provided with one option. Universal solutions or declarations have been crushing diversity at a fast rate. We need to be careful not to extend this destruction further, and into new domains, such as literacy. We had enough destruction caused by education and development during the past few decades. We need to be careful and critical.

I can say that I have been lucky with three things in my life: I lived a good part of my life in the pre-development age; a main teacher in my life was an illiterate person; and I lived most of my life without a national government. The three provided me with a worldview that is not attainable through institutions and professionals. I feel lucky because I had to rethink constantly of the meanings of words, because I had to be responsible for most of what we needed in my community, and because often we had to live with what is available to all people: each other, nature, what the land produces, and the ability to feel, reflect, learn, and express. I feel lucky because I had living examples of people who embodied a different way of living, according to a different logic, different values, different assumptions and different convictions.

The Literacy Programme, Part and Parcel of Eritrea's March Towards "Education for All"

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Eritrea is a relatively young country and is expending much effort to move development forward as well as to recover from the effects of recent conflict. This paper describes the current work undertaken by the Government in literacy, providing insights into its organization and approach, with an assessment of the issues it raises.

1 Background

Eritrea is situated in the Horn of Africa bordering the Red Sea, the Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti. Although no official census has been conducted so far, the population of Eritrea is approximately three million. The nine ethnic groups of Eritrea, each of them with its own language and culture, inhabit a variety of environments, ranging from hot semi-desert low-lands to cold high land plateaux with an altitude of up to 3,000 metres. The country is regionalized into six administrative regions called "Zobas". Each zoba is in turn divided into "Sub-zobas" which are further sub-divided into "Kebabis" (a village or set of small villages). A decentralized form of administration has been introduced in the past six years.

After a thirty-year war for independence, Eritrea emerged with a legacy of destroyed infrastructure and weak economy in addition to degradation of the environment, which caused, inter alia, food deficits. At independence in 1991, like all the other services, education and cultural development were severely affected and underdeveloped. The general situation could be characterized as follows:

• High death rate and birth rates prevailing in the population.

• Widespread superstitious beliefs in the population.

• Lack of use of modern methods and tools in agriculture.

- Low productivity and extreme poverty prevailing in the population.

- Poor use of natural resources and activities that harm the environment.

- Lack of use of modern technology and information to improve living conditions.

- Inadequate social services such as education, healthcare, etc.

- Resistance to girls' (women's) education, equal participation and empowerment and adherence to traditional sex stereotypes.

- Generally very limited capacity to participate and contribute in economic, social, cultural and political life of their communities and country.

- Scattered life-styles prominent in the rural population (large settlements often dispersing in search of food and water for their livestock).

1.1 Manifestations of the Educational Situation at Independence
Education in Eritrea was characterized by a number of severe problems on its accession to independence, including the following:
- High illiteracy rate prevailing in the population.

- Very limited expansion of the formal education system.

- High dropout and high repetition rates characterized the education system in place.

- Very low participation of girls resulting in serious gender gaps in the system.

- Adult education activities (both literacy and continuing education programmes) were very limited and concentrated in a few areas, usually towns.

- Literate environment almost non-existent (no libraries, cultural centres, community centres etc).

After independence, the literacy programme in the country was seen as part of the government's commitment to economic, social, cultural and political development and *Education for All*. One of the main objectives of the macro-policy on education and training is to make basic education available to all. Similarly the national education policy has stressed the provision of literacy at least for three years to those aged 15-45 years old (adults and youth) who previously missed out, ensuring the provision of continuing education through formal and non-formal channels to achieve a more literate and skilled population.

2 The Literacy Programme

The objective is for Eritrea to become a fully literate nation. Thus, the short term quantitative goal is to attain at least 60 per cent adult literacy by the year 2006 and then reach 85 – 90 per cent literacy by 2015 which is stipulated in our *Education for All* programme.

The ultimate qualitative goal of the literacy programme and all adult education in Eritrea is to improve the quality of life of all Eritreans who in the past experienced isolation, discrimination and marginalization. The overall programme objectives are therefore the promotion of social justice, cultural development, political maturity and stability and economic prosperity.

2.1 Policies and Principles

With a view to attaining 85-90 per cent literacy rate by the year 2015, the following basic policies have been formulated:

• Literacy classes are open to all adults who presently lack or feel the need of acquiring or improving the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic in Eritrean languages.

• Participation of learners in the programme is voluntary and without charge.

- The minimum age to enter the adult literacy programme is normally 15 years. However, individuals under the age of 15, who are regarded as being too old to enter primary schools, are accommodated in the literacy classes. Special considerations are given to nomadic, semi-nomadic and other isolated communities.

- In isolated communities, multi-stage and family literacy teaching is encouraged, meaning that the literacy facilitator (promoter) has to be prepared to teach whatever stages the few learners need and include out-of-school children among the learners.

- The literacy programme is a government-supported programme involving the whole nation with opportunities for all stakeholders to take part.

- The leadership and executive management of adult literacy is vested at central (national) level in the Ministry of Education, Adult Education Division.

- Partnerships are sought at all levels with all stakeholders, such as higher education institutions, military and quasi-military institutions (Ministry of Defense, Sawa National Service Programme), community development agencies, community leaders, political leaders, religious organizations, national and international insert non-governmental organizations (ngos), United Nations agencies, public institutions, other ministries and the private sector. Partnerships can entail any kind of fruitful co-operation in the areas of:
- mobilization activities for literacy at various levels;
- delivery of literacy (classes) or any other literacy services;
- resource-sharing activities;
- professional support such as training and curriculum development;
- linking literacy to other development projects;
- conducting research and evaluation activities.

In the five years between 2002-2006, the Enhanced Adult Literacy Programme aims to provide 450,000 adults with literacy and numeracy skills. Mother tongue learning will be the norm. Special attention will be given to ensuring the participation of the disabled, women, the internally displaced, refugees returning from Sudan, and demobilized members of the Eritrean Defence Forces.

The training being provided in literacy and numeracy will be supported by educational broadcasting, small rural libraries or reading rooms and by day care facilities for the children of women learners. So as to enable new learners to consolidate their skills and use them to improve their social and economic status, literacy graduates and other students will be trained in marketable skills. Support to basic education will be provided for school drop-outs, demobilized soldiers and other adults. Three multi-purpose centres will be developed over five years (each centre will provide skills training to students from two zobas); these will incorporate literacy centres, reading rooms, listening centres and skills training facilities.

The Adult Literacy Programme is demand-led. Serious mobilization efforts are made to motivate adults to join the programme, using local leaders, new learners, the mass media, posters and other means. Participation is, however, voluntary. It follows that the Adult Education Division does not know the exact number of programme participants very far in advance. This means that each year the Adult Education Division and zoba authorities have to respond flexibly, mobilizing resources according to the actual numbers of people in different geographical areas who register for the programme.

Eritrea has a number of special characteristics that shape the programme. These characteristics include: very low levels of development, especially in rural areas where most of the population lives; the presence of several social groups who either are or who risk being marginalized; and a high degree of social and linguistic diversity. As described below, the design of the five-year literacy programme in place incorporates strategies and approaches that aim to take these features into account.

Eritrean society is diverse, with different social groups pursuing different livelihoods in varied geographic settings. So as not to disrupt livelihoods and, at the same time, so as to encourage a high level of participation in the programme, literacy training is planned around these differences. For example, in rural areas, in order to accommodate differing patterns of climate and agricultural activity, courses are run during different months. Courses in rural areas usually run for two hours a day, five days a week for six months. In more remote areas, where the population is scattered and often mobile, the courses are shorter. In urban areas and in the army, courses are held daily throughout the year.

Government policy is to promote mother tongue learning at primary level. Eritrea's social diversity is reflected in its linguistic diversity and, for the Adult Education Division, this required literacy and basic education materials, as well as broadcast programmes, to be available in several – eventually in all nine – local languages. Significant progress has been made, but more remains to be done, particularly with respect to the smaller language groups where it is more difficult to find professionals able to assist in material preparation. More mother tongue teaching materials are also needed for students who have progressed beyond the first phase of literacy learning.

The Government of Eritrea in its Human Resource Policy Document (November 2001) states the principles of education, and declares:

Education in Eritrea is a fundamental human right and a lifelong process by which all individuals are given opportunities to attain their potential as all-round citizens along with a firm belief in and loyalty to the Eritrean nation. This process includes the development of enlightened, creative, confident and productive individuals with a sense of responsibility and social justice who are capable of contributing towards the development of a united, harmonious, democratic, equitable, modern, technologically advanced and self-reliant Eritrea.

Within the framework of this philosophy, the mission of the Ministry of Education will be:

To provide all citizens of the State of Eritrea with access to learning opportunities and to ensure a quality of education and training provision relevant and responsive to individual and national development needs. This provision shall take note of the special circumstance of specific social groups, including disadvantaged and marginalized communities.

The Ministry of Education's policy and goals coincide with the national development strategy as outlined in the macro policy of 1994. The Ministry of Education aims to move vigorously towards expanding and improving the provision of basic *Education For All* in the coming 15 years while reducing the rate of illiteracy to 40 per cent by the year 2006. Thus the Government of Eritrea promotes a rights-based and demand-led approach to education, which asserts that all citizens are entitled to learning (at least at basic level) that is appropriate and relevant to their needs. At present achieving this right is limited by the availability of resources, which affects the pace and the way education can be delivered.

Within this principle, the goal of adult education is to ensure that by 2015 more than 85 per cent of the population is literate. Literacy is seen as a precondition both for individual and national development. Moreover, the education of women and girls is strongly and positively correlated with other components of economic growth.

The literacy programme is an integral part of the national education system and so takes into consideration the major national (educational) goals in planning and implementing the programme. These goals and principles can be summarized as follows:
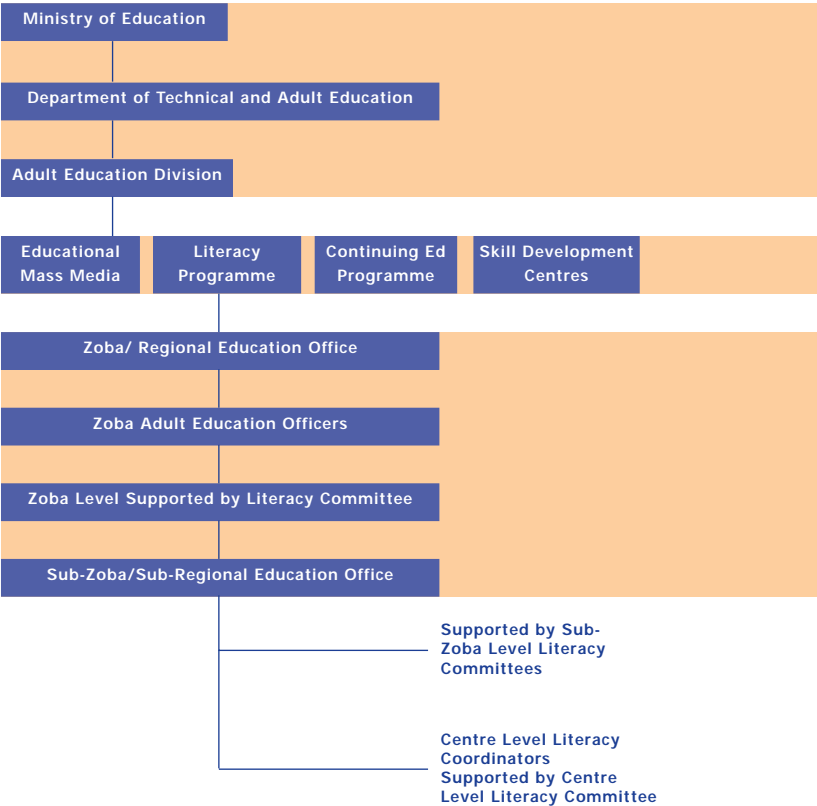
Access: Basic education should be accessible to all through formal education for the school age population and through adult education programmes for those who are above school age (school age children who missed out on the formal system for a variety of reasons will be admitted to the adult education programmes).

Equity: The adult education division in collaboration with other stakeholders will provide educational opportunities (literacy and beyond) for those adults who were marginalized and experienced discrimination in the past. Multiple paths into and through the education system will be developed in order to meet the needs of learners of different ages and at different stages in their lives. This way, all Eritreans will be able to receive education and training on an equitable basis.

Quality: Quality education requires trained teachers, continuous follow-up and support and sufficient contact hours. Adult education will ensure that basic literacy is of comparable and equivalent standard to the formal basic education for children and at the same time meet the needs and interests of adult learners. Learner-centred, adult approaches and other participatory methods which are essential for quality education provision will be used in our literacy education.

Social Justice: Our basic adult literacy programme will promote the culture of mutual respect, respect for democratic institutions, effective participation in the democratic process and respect and defence of basic human rights.

The Adult Education Division is a sub-sector within the Ministry of Education. It is structured as follows to carry out its duties and responsibilities.

Ministry of Education

Department of Technical and Adult Education

Adult Education Division

Educational Mass Media **Literacy Programme** **Continuing Ed Programme** **Skill Development Centres**

Zoba/ Regional Education Office

Zoba Adult Education Officers

Zoba Level Supported by Literacy Committee

Sub-Zoba/Sub-Regional Education Office

Supported by Sub-Zoba Level Literacy Committees

Centre Level Literacy Coordinators Supported by Centre Level Literacy Committee

The office of the Adult Education Division has overall responsibility for the planning, management, monitoring and evaluation of the programme. The main areas of activity and priorities of the office are to:

• Develop a policy and legislative framework for adult education (including literacy) in the country.

• Build the capacity of the division by recruiting new professional staff and upgrading the skills of existing staff through formal and non-formal training and short study leaves.

• Set short term and long-term Literacy Programme targets and activities in consultation with the regional education offices (zoba education offices).

• Plan, monitor and evaluate the literacy and numeracy programmes.

• Ensure that funds for the programme are secure and disburses funds for the programme.

• Develop literacy, post-literacy and other supplementary reading materials in each mother tongue.

• Plan and implement activities that support the ongoing literacy programme by establishing rural reading rooms, radio-listening centres, cultural activities.

The Division works hard to create partnerships with various institutions and agencies e.g. other ministries, United Nations agencies, local and international ngos, development partners, religious organizations and private sector companies. Partners participate in the literacy programme in various activities and various ways, for example:

- Mobilizing learners especially within their own organization.
- Making premises available for literacy programmes (rooms for classes).
- Making reading materials available to learners.

- Assisting in developing course materials and training of staff.
- Providing food for training to enable the participation of poor non-literates.
- Establishing community based childcare services that help women's participation in the programme.
- Providing timely feedback on the literacy activities within their own organization.

Zoba and sub-zoba level adult education offices implement the literacy programme.

Zoba and sub-Zoba Adult Education Office
The duties of the zoba education offices in relation to the literacy programme are to:
• Plan and activate the overall strategy for the zoba literacy programme.

• Supervise the proper implementation of the programme by the sub-zoba adult education officers.

• Provide professional support to the sub-zoba officers and organize two monthly meetings to discuss programme developments.

• Organize facilitators' recruitment, training and development.

• Monitor and evaluate the programme with the help of sub-zoba level adult education office and literacy committees.

• Mobilize all possible support for the programme from potential stake holders and partners, including community leaders.

Similar organization, duties and responsibilities are also assigned to the sub-zoba level adult education offices.

Literacy committees are established at zoba, sub-zob, kebabi (village) and literacy centres to assist with mobilization activities, monitoring and follow-up of the literacy activities, to give regular support and advice on enrolment, to invite and encourage involvement of partners, and to encourage and support literacy facilitators.

Literacy Facilitators (Teachers)

Literacy facilitators are selected from three sources.

- Community members. They have to be qualified, motivated and available to teach literacy classes.

- Formal school teachers who have sufficient time to become involved in teaching in the literacy programme.

- Recruits to the National Service, which is obligatory, are involved in teaching as part of their programme (especially women).

All the three categories of teachers are given training on adult teaching methodology before starting to teach.

Literacy facilitators and committees working in one area have monthly meetings to review the progress of the programme. Similar review exercises take place regularly at sub-zoba and zoba level offices to follow progress of the literacy programme.

Literacy Phases

The literacy programme is made up of three consecutive phases:

- *Phase one* – which teaches the 3rs (reading, writing and arthimetic) plus life skills such as health, agriculture, environment and citizenship education.

- *Phase two* – this phase is a consolidation of phase one with more emphasis on life skills.

• *Phase three* – in this phase, life and functional skills are provided. Adults who complete this phase are given opportunities to join the formal school system or join skills training programmes organized by other ministries, development agencies and community based organizations.

Adult Literacy Participants

The following tables show overall participation, and breakdown by gender, region, dropout rates, completion and language group:

Table 1 Enrolment, Dropout and Completion by Zoba and Gender 2002

Zoba / Region	Enrolment		Dropout		Complete		% Com.	Centres	Sections
	Total	Fem	Total	Fem	Total	Fem			
Maekel	2847	2815	720	707	2127	2108	75%	117	215
Debub	24142	22784	7310	6956	16832	15828	70%	411	1055
Anseba	9245	8141	2178	1684	7067	6457	76%	224	504
Gash-Barka	11525	9462	3575	2875	7950	6587	69%	215	528
S.K.Bahri	4445	4045	991	876	3454	3169	78%	62	186
D.K.Bahri	627	472	103	72	524	400	84%	16	36
Total	52831	47719	14877	13170	37954	34549	72%	1045	2524

When it comes to the composition of participants by sex and occupation, about 90 per cent of the participants are women. Most of them are farmers and housewives by occupation. This shows that the literacy activities have been focusing on the disadvantaged groups especially women.

As indicated in Table 1, 52,831 adults enrolled in all the literacy centres in 2001/2002 and 37,954 (72 per cent) completed successfully the six months course. The training was given in eight local languages; Tigrigna, Tigre, Bilen, Saho, Afar, Nara, Kunama and Arabic. As can be seen from Table 2, two of the eight local languages, Tigrigna and Tigre, shared the highest of the total number of participants (87 per cent). This is more or less in harmony with the population size of each ethnic group.

Table 2 Number of Adult Literacy Participants by Medium of Instruction/Ethnic Group

Medium of instruction	Number of participants	%
Tigrigna	34243	64%
Tigre	11893	23%
Bilen	1724	3%
Kunama	1316	3%
Nara	1288	2%
Saho	1009	2%
Arabic	807	2%
Afar	551	1%
Total	52831	100%

The diversity of delivery mode is abundantly manifest by the variety of venues used for literacy learning:

Table 3 Type of the Building of Literacy Classes

Zoba/Region	School premises	Shacks	House rents	Tree shades	Others	Total
Maekel	27	-	53	-	37	117
Debub	83	57	5	37	229	411
Anseba	71	72	26	20	35	224
Gash-Barka	88	105	10	1	11	215
S.K.Bahri	34	16	5	7	-	62
D.K.Bahri	9	7	-	-	-	16
Total	312	257	99	65	312	1045

In Table 3, others include churches, mosques, tents, residential houses and meeting halls. More than 80 per cent of the literacy classes were sited in villages.

2.2 Reaching the Unreached

Literacy is a prerequisite for effective participation and contribution in every day life. It is not only a basic human right but it also facilitates social change. The Jomtien Declaration (wcefa, 1990: 2-3) affirms that basic education is not only a right of citizenship but also a necessary condition for human development:

Education is a fundamental right for all people, men and women of all ages, through our world... it is an indispensable key though not a sufficient condition, for personal and social improvement. Sound basic education is fundamental to self-reliant development. Every person (child, youth and adult) should be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic education for all.

To reach the unreached, considerable increase in literacy provision has been evident. The Ministry of Education has made concerted efforts to provide basic education through formal and non-formal approaches and considerable increase is apparent in the 11 years of independence. Efforts were made to provide literacy in all local languages except one. The programme also covered all administrative regions and sub-regions of the country. In order to reach some isolated and disadvantaged sections, literacy activities were conducted in residential courses. Though limited in coverage, this type of provision was successful. Those groups were able to acquire basic literacy skills in a short period of time. They also created opportunities for renewed interaction and exchange of experiences.

Community based (low-cost) childcare services have been tried in rural areas to encourage more women to join learning activities. Assessments will be made to expand this exercise to create greater opportunities for women to participate. In partnership with the World Food Programme,

Food for Training programmes have been introduced as a pilot scheme. Here, poor people (mostly women) who could not afford to come to the literacy programme due to economic factors were helped by receiving food rations. This exercise has encouraged many women not only to join the literacy programme but also to follow it with all seriousness. To encourage the participation of more isolated communities, small size literacy classes were organized. Usually one literacy facilitator is supposed to teach at least 15-20 participants. However, in scattered settlements small size classes are tolerated. In situations where primers are not prepared in their own mother tongue, literacy participants are encouraged to participate in literacy classes in a local language of their own choice.

In future, serious efforts will be made to reach communities with semi-nomadic life-styles, before which there are many. The dropout of a large number of school-age children also needs special consideration. Returning refugees from the Sudan and illiterate members of the Eritrea Defence Forces are also given due consideration in the programme.

2.3 Gender Concerns

To encourage women's and girls' participation in the literacy programme, a number of efforts have been made. In the Eritrean context, women and girls face a series of obstacles that hinder their participation in literacy and other educational programmes. Mobilization activities by the Ministry of Education using various means (community leaders, religious leaders, the National Union of Eritrean Women and others) have been successful in removing most of these cultural barriers. In some rural and remote areas single sex literacy classes have been used to respond to some communities' concerns and requests. To encourage women's and girls' participation in the programme most literacy classes are organized in the villages where they live, thus decreasing distance and opportunity

costs. To sustain women's interest in the programme and develop continuous reading and discussion, small rural reading rooms are established. Women facilitators are employed in these reading rooms to advise learners what to read and when to read. Arrangements are made to enable women participating in the literacy programme to have opportunities to work in the Food for Work Programme. Basic skills training programmes have introduced quota systems for women and girls. These programmes aim to increase the chances of self-employment and wage employment. As stated above, support for poor women and the introduction of low-cost and community-based childcare services also encourage women's participation in the literacy programmes. Efforts are also being made to increase the rural reading rooms and supply them with reading materials serving the particular needs of women and girls.

3 Education for All Challenges

In the process of national development the following major challenges in relation to *Education for All* (efa) have been observed as crucial:

3.1 Macro Level

• Sustaining and consolidating all-round gains achieved during the thirty-year liberation struggle with regard to national unity, governance, democratization, and equality in development with genuine regard to the process of decentralization and local government will be a laborious task.

• The creation of a stable macro-economic environment through the elimination of the tragic consequences of war will require not only expensive resources but also an enormous level of perseverance. The economic rehabilitation of the country from the destruction inflicted by the recent border conflict will be a demanding task.

- Creating food, health and environmental security that are vital for improving the living condition of the people will also be a huge effort. hiv/aids will form a central threat for people in general and the education system in particular.

- The enormous task of producing a broad literate workforce through the provision of basic education for all citizens will be another huge pressure.

- Strong demographic movements (returnees, displaced people, demobilized and urban migration) together with dynamic population changes will impose conditions on national development.

- The allocation of sufficient and sustainable national funds for the whole efa action among all the competing national priorities of rehabilitation, creates huge constraints. This coincides with the commitment of the country to ensure for its citizens the right to basic education. If Eritrean education is to avoid being tilted away from gender and other inequalities, a much expanded efa system will be required. This will call for the mobilization of very significant resources for basic education, which represents a heavy burden at present.

3.2 Programme Level

At programme level developing and sustaining awareness of all stakeholders will be crucial:
- Literacy programme participants.

- Educational managers, supervisors, political leaders.

- Literacy promoters, literacy committees, literacy centre co-ordinators.

- Other programme stakeholders such as national and international ngos, other ministries, national professional associations.

- Partners such as United Nations agencies and international development agencies.

In terms of literacy and post-literacy provision, creating a conducive adult-friendly learning environment and diversifying modes of delivery will include the following:

• Using flexible timetables for learners in order to ensure increased access.

• Using centre-based and time-bound programmes.

• Reducing the distance between the users and the literacy centres.

• Enhancing childcare services.

• Promoting self-learning situations.

3.3 Providing Literacy in Mother Tongues

• Some ethnic groups did not have the chance of using their language in education and other official activities. These languages need to be developed so that each ethnic group uses its language in the literacy programme and other development activities.

• Providing literacy in mother tongues eased the burden of learning in a second language. However, the beneficiaries bring another challenge, i.e. the issue of the functionality of their languages.

• The development gap between the languages of the different ethnic groups also brings another challenge.

• In order to sustain and ensure continued development of newly acquired literacy and post-literacy skills, small rural libraries have been established in some rural areas. The challenges faced with by this activity are:

- Developing literacy and post literacy supplementary reading materials in each language, responsive to the needs of the users.

- Ensuring the flow of reading materials from other sources such as other ministries and local papers.

3.4 Establishing Radio Listening Centres to Support Literacy and Post Literacy Activities.

- So far the adult radio programme broadcast literacy and post-literacy programmes in two local languages only. This brings a serious challenge of inequity.

- Efforts were made to establish radio-listening centres where the literacy classes were conducted. The challenge in this programme was the absence of radios for the rural population due to poverty and the extra manpower needed to organize radio-listening programmes.

3.5 Management Challenges

- Absence of population census to establish the rate of illiteracy and to plan accordingly.

- Shortage of human resources in managing the literacy programme at zoba and sub-zoba levels.

- The huge population displacement due to the border war.

- Absence of convenient training centres for capacity improvement of literacy personnel.

- Systematic data collection not well established.

- Serious research work not done to assess impact of the literacy programme conducted so far.

3.6 Strengths

The Enhanced Adult Literacy Programme benefits from the following strengths:

- Long-standing commitment by the government to the promotion of adult education. The government is committed to cover one-third of the costs of the programme.

- A high level of enthusiasm to participate among target groups. This was shown, for example, in the number who continued to attend classes even when under bombardment during the border war.

- Positive lessons learned from the pilot phase of the programme and from earlier literacy and other adult education programmes.

- Rich experience gained in every aspect of running a large-scale literacy programme. Examples are the mobilization activities in support of the programme, the development of literacy and post-literacy materials at various levels, training of literacy facilitators, co-ordinators, supervisors, monitoring and implementation of the programme, monitoring and evaluation of teaching learning activities, etc.

- Supplementary reading materials development in the different local languages.

- The use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction.

- High completion rates (70 per cent).

- High number of literacy participants (130,000) having completed at least Stage 1.

4 Future Perspectives

Basic literacy and other basic education activities have to continue with increased access and ever increasing quality. To respond to the urgent needs of diverse communities effectively we must assess the situation on the ground. The 30-year liberation struggle left many thousands of refugees in the Sudan. Most of them have now returned to their country. More than a million people have been internally displaced due to the border war. The war is over but some have not yet returned to their homes. With peace returning, more than 200,000 soldiers will be demobilized, rehabilitated and reintegrated. Approximately 30,000 of them are

non-literate. Future basic education programmes must accommodate these aspects to provide inclusive and meaningful programmes.

Literacy and other basic education programmes are given in the mother tongue – an empowering and successful exercise. The Adult Education Division will strengthen its capacity to develop literacy and other basic education materials and radio programmes in all local languages. As stipulated in the unofficial efa document, education in the mother tongue will be consolidated as a way of building a vital educational basis and enhancing participants' self-confidence, self-esteem and educational accomplishment. Improving the standard use of the languages will also be a major task in improving the relevance of basic education.

The literacy programme will achieve impact only if (i) newly literate people are able to maintain their reading, writing and numeracy skills and (ii) if they are able to use these to improve their social and economic circumstances. We recognize that sustainability of acquired skills needs a literate environment. The creation of literate environments will be realized by opening more rural reading rooms, cultural centres, radio listening centres and so on in rural areas.

Every effort will be made to ensure the right of all adults to functional literacy through the introduction of basic literacy and numeracy skills, basic life skills and information essential for better living. Inclusive and diversified lifelong learning situations will be developed within the world of work. Community skills training will be integrated in adult education programmes so as to instil minimum technical skills in adults and youth. Adult education programmes will be used as a means of empowering and enlightening adults to change their living conditions, improve their livelihood and increase responsible participation in community and national affairs.

Efforts will be made to develop the institutional capacity of the adult education system at local, regional and national levels. The emphasis will be on developing educational planning, decision making, execution and evaluation, with strong engagement of civil society.

In consolidating literacy and adult education programmes, educational radio services will expand and broadcast in all local languages. Radio listening centres will be established in selected literacy and community centres where group listening and discussions are facilitated. These centres will be established in rural and poor urban areas. The establishment of rural libraries and cultural centres will further strengthen these initiatives.

In the literacy curriculum and other post literacy courses, relevance will be assessed. Courses on health, environment, moral and civic studies, peace education, and hiv/aids will be incorporated to increase learners' safety and survival knowledge and skills.

The Adult Education Division will make every effort to meet the ambitious goals and targets set by the basic *Education for All* initiative. Illiteracy will be reduced to 10 per cent. Female literacy will equal that of males, and more than 60 per cent of newly literate youth and adults will complete post literacy primary education and minimum skills training by the year 2015. The achievement of these ambitious goal will guarantee a brighter future for Eritrea.

An Unfinished Journey

Literacy among Indigenous Peoples in Ecuador

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Previous History

The countries that today make up Latin America form a population with different cultures, languages and indigenous peoples - the result of a long and complex historical process. However, the acknowledgement of this cultural diversity is relatively recent, particularly regarding indigenous societies.

Poverty and misery which mark these societies and place them at the lowest levels of the social hierarchy also have an effect on access, quality and the right to education. Despite strong efforts in bringing reading and writing to the whole region during the last decades, there are still high rates of illiteracy among indigenous peoples. This is evidence that national educational systems do not adjust to their needs. The response to this challenge is to adopt policies which will lead to differentiated education with full respect for plurality of languages and therefore of cultures, in other words respect for cultural diversity.

Illiteracy is not a problem of isolated individuals, but of society as a whole. It has its roots in a social structure that is characterized by high levels of social exclusion, based to a large extent on the discriminatory and racist perceptions and practice of the groups in power, and usually translated into state policies tainted by latent racism. Illiteracy is nothing but another face of poverty, marginalization and social injustice.

No society can claim to be democratic while illiteracy exists at its heart. In consequence, efficiently combating illiteracy must first find its place

within a social transformation project, driven by values of social justice, human dignity and equal opportunities. At the same time, it needs to correct the failings of the mainstream education system, the purpose being to improve the coverage as well as the quality of education.

Various authorities formulating international, regional and national policies have voiced the demands of indigenous peoples for education. In the *Declaration of Principles*, adopted in the General Assembly iv of the World Board of Indigenous People, held in Panama in 1986, the right of education was clearly established. This was stated in the adopted Resolution, which declared:

Indigenous peoples have the right to receive education in their own language and to establish their own educational institutions. The languages of indigenous people must be respected by the state, in all relations between indigenous people and the state on the basis of equality and avoiding all discrimination.

This approach was also used in the Continental Campaign, *500 Years of Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance*, and was reflected in the *Xelajù Declaration* in 1991. It defined as a primary task, *the inclusion of teaching the true multicultural and multilingual history in the educational programme of each country.*[1]

In the last few years, the acknowledgement of the traditional scientific knowledge of indigenous peoples[2] has become more evident. Along

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1 Memory, ii Continental Meeting "500 years of Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance." Xelajù, Guatemala. 1991.

2 See report of United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development in Brazil 1992.

with this, demands to increase the access to and the quality of their own education, which were promoted among the objectives of the *United Nations Decade of Indigenous Peoples*, set out to strengthen international co-operation in solving the problems of education faced by indigenous peoples.[3]

In the American context, the draft *American Declaration of Indigenous People's Rights,*[4] Article 9, concerning education, suggests the following: Indigenous people should have the right to:

- Establish and implement their own programmes, institutions and educational structures.

- Prepare and apply their own plans, programmes, curriculum and teaching materials.

- Train, certify and accredit their teachers and managers.

The draft declaration also adds that the states will take the necessary measures to guarantee that these systems ensure equal educational and teaching opportunities for the whole population. It recommends complementary relationships between the indigenous educational system and the national educational system. It specifies that education must be the same in all respects for the whole of the population, and that states will provide financial and any other necessary assistance, in order to implement this right. It also recognized the importance among the wider population of knowledge about the current situation of indigenous peoples, by adding, *states will include in their national educational systems content which reflects the multicultural nature of their own society.*

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3 Resolution 48/163. Adopted by consensus on December 21st 1993, United Nations.
4 In 1989, the OAS General Assembly decided to develop a draft *Declaration on Indigenous Peoples' Rights*. The Human Rights Inter-American Commission prepared the first proposal which has been submitted to consult and is being revised by a Work Group of the OAS Permanent Board.

Indigenous organizations expressed the opinion, among other things, that not only the past history of indigenous peoples should be disseminated, but also their current situation, without distortions that lead to discrimination. They have also indicated that the methods, form and content of educational models have to fit with the regions inhabited by indigenous peoples and with their customs, avoiding any sanction on the use of their own language, as well as respecting requirements to avoid damage to the indigenous economy and culture.[5]

Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization (ilo) also refers to education, in Parts iv and vi.[6] In Article 28 the right to teach in their own indigenous language, or in the language more commonly spoken in the group they belong to, is established. It also recommends taking measures to preserve indigenous languages, to promote their development and practice, to reform national constitutions and to strengthen bilingual intercultural education.

From the 1980s, important constitutional changes in Latin America have been seen. More than 50 per cent of the countries recognize the multi-ethnic composition of their inhabitants.[7] Among the collective rights of indigenous peoples and ethnic communities recognized by the state are the official recognition of indigenous languages and bilingual intercultural education, besides their existence as multiple collective identities.

There is great diversity in the terminology used in the recognition of these rights, from protectionist approaches to the recognition of indigenous people's own education. Bilingual intercultural education has

5 oas annual report 1992.

6 The Agreement 169 of ilo was approved in 1989. Fourteen countries have ratified it.

7 Gregor Barie, C. Indigenous people and constitutional rights in Latin America. iii Mexicos. 2000.

been reinforced through legislative measures, and agreements between countries and international institutions. The approach has been consistent with democratic advances in the region and the aim of different countries to decentralize administration and policies.

Education in Ecuador

Ecuador is a multi-cultural, multilingual and multi-ethnic country made up of indigenous peoples and nationalities, Afro-Ecuadorian and other populations. Indigenous peoples are located in three regions: in the coastal region the Awa, Chachi, Tsa'chila and Epera peoples; in the mountains the Kichwa and in the Amazon region the Cofan, Siona, Secoya, Zapara, Huaorani, Kichwa, Shuar, and Achuar. They maintain their culture, form of government, administration of justice, and territory. They also actively maintain their social practices, traditions and customs, language and thought – part of the cultural riches of Ecuador.

However, the kind of education offered to indigenous peoples was traditionally oriented towards their indiscriminate assimilation, thus limiting their social, cultural and economic development. This type of education has moreover undermined the identity of indigenous peoples and caused racist situations to develop to the detriment of the country. In addition, there is also the lack of personnel trained in teaching and in administration of the school system who understand the reality of the population and know their language and culture, as well as a lack of learning materials, among other things.

Literacy in Ecuador

Literacy has a long tradition in Ecuador as a governmental activity. However, illiteracy is still an unsolved problem of huge dimensions, concentrated in rural areas and above all among indigenous peoples, with a rich cultural background.

The inability of the state to guarantee to rural and urban populations a more equitable distribution of social services and access to private and public education reveals unequal perspectives from a human resource point of view. The positive impact that education has on the economic development of people is undeniable, and vice versa the negative impact caused by the low access to education is also great. The lack of access to educational institutions until 1990[8] was significant. On the one hand, the geographical distance between educational establishments was a factor due to the low coverage in rural areas and also the economic and working conditions of a rural family. On the other hand, in the case of indigenous peoples the language constraint was also a discriminating aspect, adding to the gender differences already existing in society. In this respect, the national illiteracy rate is 20.4 per cent, whereas the rates in the rural areas of the mountain range are 41.9 per cent for women and 33.3 per cent for men (siise 1997).[9]

In spite of the decline of illiteracy and the general rise in school attendance, a number of marked gender inequalities remain regarding access and survival at the different levels of education. In 1994 11.4 per cent of the population over 15 years was illiterate, and women represented 13 per cent, a proportion which rose according to locations. Illiteracy affects mostly the rural population and women, with the largest percentage in the highland region.

Educational opportunities for rural women depend to a great extent on the public services which exist in their communities. Even if most rural communities in the country have a primary school, few secondary schools and hardly any adult education programmes exist. The failings

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8 Information from the v Population Census and vi Housing Census from 1990.

9 Sistema Integrado de Indicadores Sociales del Ecuador. Convenios bid-Gobierno del Ecuador.

at the basic level are particularly serious for adult women, with the result that they did not have educational opportunities over the previous decades.

Until 1995 only 35 per cent of indigenous women finished primary school, less than half the number of urban women. Until that year most of those attending secondary education were women (55 per cent). In spite of this progress, access to the secondary level is lower in rural areas, such that only one in five indigenous boys gained entrance to secondary school. In these areas access to secondary school for young women is almost completely absent.

Without a shadow of doubt, the indigenous population is the most disadvantaged in the country, and women are educationally the most deprived group, and the most affected by illiteracy. Until 1995 41 per cent of those belonging to rural households speaking an indigenous language did not know how to read or write, either in Spanish or their own language, while that was the case for 15 per cent of the non-indigenous population.[10] This is still the current situation and a large sector of the population is plunging into poverty, owing, among other things, to the lack of a component to promote productivity and development. To sum up, to live in a rural area, to be indigenous and to be a woman presents a higher correlation with illiteracy and with the lowest levels of education, in short, with poverty itself.

From 1963 a department has existed in the Ministry of Education responsible for adult education, including literacy. In the 1980s the national literacy programme (1980-1984) was carried out and reduced illiteracy by 13 per cent in four years. The *Bilingual Literacy Programme* deserves particular mention – it focused on the twelve ethnic groups in the country and aimed to revitalize their culture.

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10 Social indicators on the situation
of indigenous and peasant women
in rural Ecuador 1998.

Between 1984 and 1988 no initiatives were carried out in the field of adult literacy. Under the government of 1988 to 1992 the *Monseñor Leonidas Proaño National Literacy Campaign* took place and through intensive and wide-ranging strategies enabled the country to become aware of the illiteracy problem. Since this period, there have been no significant activities in the area of adult literacy.

The last national literacy campaign *Monseñor Leonidas Proaño* (May 1989 – September 1990) gave the following information:

• Illiteracy decreased from 13.9 per cent to 11.5 per cent (dinepp, National Department of Continuing Education, 1996).

• Literacy workers: 8,222 students in the last grade in secondary school and within institutes (cepp, November 1989).

• Learners: 65 per cent between 15 and 44 years old; from 45 years old upward: 12.9 per cent of which 62.1 per cent are women and 36 per cent are men (unesco, 1990).

• Effect by region: 33.8 per cent on the coast; 59.5 per cent in the mountain range and 6.7 per cent in Amazonia (unesco, 1990).[11]

Illiteracy Rates Following 1989–1990 Literacy Campaign

	Numbers			Percentage of total population		
	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
Urban areas	86 413	43 643	130 056	1.5%	0.7%	2.2%
Rural areas	326 240	225 423	551 663	5.5%	3.8%	9.3%
Total	412 653	269 066	681 719	7.0%	4.5%	11.5%

11 Soto Ileana. Adult education and bilingualism: the case of Ecuador. Page 215.

In youth and adult education various programmes exist, such as

- the Ecuador Studies programme which later continued in 1996-1997 under the name New Cultural Departure and was transferred to the responsibility of dinepp in 1998.

- the procalmuc project designed for the education and training of peasant women.

- the Adult Education and Professional Training Project of mec/secab/ World Bank aimed at training and development of qualifications of the socio-culturally diverse Teaching/Learning Process in circumstances of poverty.

According to information of prodepine[12] the poverty rate represents 46 per cent of the Ecuadorian population, within which 86 out of 100 indigenous persons are in a situation of poverty. With regard to unsatisfied basic needs, although 52.8 per cent of the Ecuadorian population lacks basic services, 92.7 per cent of the indigenous peoples and Afro-Ecuadorians do not have access to these services. This situation has worsened through lack of education. While the country's general rate of illiteracy is 10.8 per cent, for indigenous peoples it is 42.5 per cent and for indigenous women it is 53.2 per cent.

The Department of Continuing Education has been a branch of the Ministry of Education since 1989, and is in charge of executing the projects and programmes of literacy and education for adults for the whole population of Ecuador. At the end of 1988 the National Department of Bilingual Intercultural Education (dineib) was created. Within this, the Department of Continuing Education is in charge of education for indigenous adults. In each of the Provincial Departments of Bilingual Intercultural Education a department with the same name exists.

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12 Project of Development of Indigenous and Black People from Ecuador, September 1998 and June 2002.

In the last few years dineib unfortunately had to close some of the literacy centres as well as activity and craftwork training centres in most of the provinces of the country. The main reasons are the lack of staff to teach reading and writing, lack of didactic materials, and a pay level of only 80 US dollars per month. Besides this, dineib did not have a policy to support the development of a literacy programme even though this programme was the basis for the creation of bilingual intercultural education.

The *Bilingual Intercultural Education Model*[13] maintains that adult education should take into account the particular situation of members of indigenous communities who for socio-cultural and economic reasons cannot attend ordinary educational institutions, independently of age. However, it is clear that the very education system maintains illiteracy given the breakdown of the regular system. In addition, it is evident that the kind of attention given to the illiterate population does not meet the needs either of the population or of the country, with a resulting waste of resources.

Finally, it is regrettably the case that educators in the literacy centres are not valued as experts. Their training has received no support. They are excluded from any type of benefit including their monthly pay.

Currently a new trend has appeared among indigenous peoples. Not only do they wish to learn to read and write but also they want to relate it to productive activities. For this reason, the Department is creating centres of craftwork production. At the centres, in addition to teaching reading and writing, craftwork such as textile crafts, basketwork and

13 Modelo del Sistema de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe -moseib-, Noviembre 1988, dineib. p.31.

pottery were also taught. In this way, the knowledge acquired can be used towards family subsistence. Finally, another aspect has appeared whereby indigenous people have incorporated family education as part of their learning in the literacy centres.

Therefore, any new literacy campaign must combine reading and writing, production and family education, and must use indigenous languages. Such a literacy programme should address aspects such as language and culture, sustainable development and family training. In this manner the new needs of indigenous people would be satisfied. Learners should not only be taught how to read and write, but classes should be holistic. They should be strongly orientated towards strengthening personal cultural identity, developing sensory and emotional perception, fostering creativity, strengthening ethical and aesthetic values, the care, conservation and preservation of nature and understanding of the relationship between people and nature, among other aspects.

The Bilingual Literacy in the Province of Tungurahua

The Provincial Department of Bilingual Intercultural Education of Tungurahua (dipeib-t) with the Sub-section of Cultural Literacy are in charge of teaching reading and writing to Kichwa people such as the Salasacas, Kisapinchas, Chibuleos and Tomabelas; in those indigenous groups, 15 literacy, 13 activity, and 6 craftwork training centres were established. However those centres are not enough to cover demand from the communities. Within these centres the Kichwa language is used, as a fundamental factor to increase the level of education, strengthen the identity of indigenous peoples and improve knowledge of the current socio-cultural situation. These elements are based on the experience of the community and are imparted by the community.

The materials used in bilingual literacy centres are similar to those used in the national literacy campaign *Monseñor Leonidas Proaño*, the difference being that indigenous languages are used for instruction and Spanish is used as a language of intercultural relations. Moreover, the didactic material reflects the situation of the learners and the possibilities offered by modern technology. This approach promotes self-education and free education. It is integrated into the implementation of production and marketing projects at family or community level, endeavouring at the same time to open up new and broader market possibilities.[14]

These materials were made to teach reading and writing. Arithmetic was not included for the following reasons:

• It was an intensive campaign, of short duration.

• Mathematical illiterates – innumerates – do not exist, because each youth or adult that does not know how to read or write knows how to do basic mental arithmetic.

• Arithmetic will be included in the programme of post-literacy.

Mathematics among indigenous peoples has been developed from practice, in such a way that literacy learners can adequately add, subtract and multiply.

The Kichwa Salasaca People

The Kichwa Salasaca people are located in the centre of the Andes of Ecuador, within the province of Tungurahua, in the district Pelileo, parish Salasaca. There are twelve thousand inhabitants who speak the Kichwa language. They are organized in "ayllus", formed by the father,

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14 Modelo del Sistema de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe -moseib-, Noviembre 1988, dineib. p.31.

mother, their children, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law. The children are active members in the tasks of family production from a very young age.

Kichwas Salasaca's economy is transitional as they survive on agriculture, cattle breeding and craftwork production. One of the expressions of Salasacas cultural identity is craftwork that can be seen in their tapestries of different motifs and designs made by hand in textile mills, which recount their experiences. Agriculture is for their own consumption and is done in two ecological levels, the high and the low. They are organized into 18 communes, which belong to the local organization Indigenous Union of Salasaca (unis). Work is done as voluntary communal labour and decisions are taken democratically in the Assemblies called by the organization.

Salasaca is one of the rare communities of the province which has benefited from education in that it developed a small group of professionals among its members. The formal school system was adopted as early as the 1950s when Catholic missionaries set up a mission school in their desire to incorporate indigenous people through acculturation. A 1973 publication by Wulf Weiss well illustrates the rise of this group at the beginning of the 1970s, during which the first woman graduate in educational science was teaching Salasaca children. Some of these are currently qualified professionals or, with an intermediate education, can be found in posts in the indigenous hierarchy at provincial and community level.

Concerning education in Salasaca, the following milestones stand out:

Years	Events
1965	The *Sergio Núñez* school in Huasalata, at first a one-teacher school (one teacher for the six grades), was built at the same time as the Cabildo Building of the Salasaca Centre community.
1970	First indigenous literacy school in the convent of the Laurita sisters to which Salasaca indigenous youth went.
1971	The *Lions Club Ladies School*, founded by the first indigenous[15] teacher, started with 40 indigenous and non-indigenous children of the Salasaca, Masabacho and Pintag communities.
1982	Creation of the School Fiscomisional *Los Salasaca*, founded by the Laureta missionaries. It is a full-cycle school with seven grades and because of its location is the most crowded, drawing indigenous and non-indigenous pupils from outlying areas.
1983	Creation of the *Manzanapamba Chico* school, the second school founded by Teacher Francisca Jerez, belonging to the hispanic system of education and after seven years forming part of inter-cultural bilingual education. This centre is currently known as the Manzapamba Educational Unit and includes primary education and the basic stage.
1986	Start of the literacy campaign headed by dineib with indigenous educators, particularly pupils of the sixth class of secondary school.
1987	Creation of schools in Huamanloma, Ramosloma and Zanjaloma, at first hispanic schools, but later became bilingual and are currently full-cycle schools.

15 Teacher Francisca Jerez C founded the
Pintag school with no name, later
called the "Lions Club Ladies School."

1988 | Creation of the School *Intiñan* with a pilot plan of *Learning by doing*, with the support of the Danish Government (infrastructure and land).

1992 | Creation of the school in Masabacho.[16]

In the parish of Salasaca 17.9 per cent of the population older than six years is non-literate, mainly in the low zone (19 per cent) and in the high zone (17.6 per cent) and among those more than 24 years old, women (21.4 per cent) and a lower proportion of men (14.7 per cent). In the total population of non-literates 88 per cent are in the 24 years old and above age group.

The communities with a higher percentage of illiteracy are: Manzanapamba Alto (32.9 per cent), Zanjaloma Bajo (24 per cent), Capillapamba (28 per cent); and the three with less percentage of illiteracy are: Vargaspamba (13 per cent), Salasaca Centre (9.5 per cent) and Kuriñan (5.8 per cent).

According to the 1990 census, the rural district of Pelileo had 11.5 per-cent of non-literates over 10 years old. Comparing this information from the district with the current percentage in the zone studied, over a period of 10 years in the parish of Salasaca the average illiteracy rate is 6.4 per cent higher than in the district.

Today the parish of Salasaca, has neither literacy centres nor bilingual activity centres. One of the reasons is that the inhabitants do not wish to learn only reading and writing but for their needs, they must also learn productive activities that will help towards their incomes.

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16 Salasaca Local Development Plan,
propedine – unis 2000.

Bilingual Literacy Philosophy

The literacy campaign was an educational process for the people learning to read and write as well as for the teachers themselves and for Ecuadorian society as a whole. Taking part in this campaign was a way in which to better understand our national reality and to make a contribution to changing it. The task of the literacy worker was part of broader community work which included the group of which the learners were members: their families, neighbours, the organization or the community to which they belonged.

For that reason the campaign adopted a community approach to education. The aim of the campaign was that the people teaching reading and writing should become real educators and serve the community, gaining a space in the everyday life of the people, sharing their problems and happiness and being involved in their hopes, plans and achievements. This was the only way to attain a mutual learning system between those teaching and those learning and thus sow in the consciousness of some the need to build a fairer society.

In the case of indigenous peoples, a number of common characteristics had to be taken into account: they share the same geographical space, they have a defined social and economic structure, they share a history and a historical memory, a language, a style of life, a particular culture. They also share the same problem: poverty with all the needs of housing, health, work, education, and many others. These common issues and needs led this group to develop co-operation and solidarity bonds, as well as organizing to defend themselves and to claim their rights.

However, within this group of people there are also differences and conflicts of all kinds, such as relations of power, domination and subordina-

tion in the family, organization between leaders and authorities. Literacy workers had therefore to get to know and respect the life-styles and organization of the group, with the aim of avoiding rejection or unnecessary conflicts, helping to reinforce the bonds of friendship and co-operation within the group.

The campaign's educational proposal had as its main characteristics:

- *Education that starts from the situation and knowledge of the learners.* The starting point of any educational process is not the knowledge of the educator but the knowledge of the learner. The child that begins school is not a blank slate. Moreover, youth and adults have already developed a thought system and have wide knowledge not only about their current situation, but also about the world, our national circumstances, our culture, geography and history. We learn better and faster what interests us, what is close to our concerns and daily experiences, when we know already something about the subject and can contribute with our comments and thoughts.

- *Education based on dialogue and mutual learning.* The learner is not ignorant, nor the educator wise. Both know many things, both are ignorant of many things. That is why, in the educational process, both teach and learn at the same time.

- *Questioning and interactive education.* This means that we need a pedagogy of questioning that stimulates and challenges the creative capacity of educators as well as learners.

- *Transforming education linked with action.* Linking theory and practice, study and work, intellectual work and manual work – both are complementary and valuable.

- *Education that empowers.* Democratic education based on dialogue and mutual respect, which stimulates criticism and the development of

independent thinking, which foments participation, collective learning and co-operation, education that stimulates questioning, analysis and discussion.

Basically, with these characteristics what should be reflected is that the model of intercultural bilingual education at all levels of teaching considers that plans and programmes relate only to the process of knowledge acquisition. They should correspond more closely to the needs of the population and fit in with both the situation of indigenous peoples and the national and universal contexts.

Co-operation

During the National Programme of Literacy 1980-1984 a programme of bilingual education for indigenous people was developed, known as Educational Model macac. It introduced three topics: image, mathematics and language. The Educational Corporation macac, which was to be one of the first partners, developed it.

In 1989 an agreement of Scientific Co-operation was signed between the Ministry of Education and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (conaie). This agreement makes conaie responsible for

From Literacy to Work

Cesar Umajinga, current Prefect in the Province of Cotopaxi, who was taught in a literacy centre, was afterwards in charge of teaching reading and writing and finally finished his studies and is now the first indigenous Prefect of Ecuador.

Baltazar Chiliquinga current Director of the Registry Office, who learnt to read and write, then became a community educator, and finished his sec-

the training of indigenous personnel and for the preparation of didactic material for the campaign using a bilingual intercultural method.

There is a direct link between dineib and indigenous organizations at national, provincial and local levels to implement all the programmes of education. At the moment there is strong co-ordination between unesco's Regional Office and dineib, to prepare the United Nations Literacy Decade, which started in 2003. It is expected to take up again the bilingual approach as the basis for the success of another campaign.

Programme development has the support of the Education Law and is designed by the National Department of National Bilingual Education. Materials are made specifically for intercultural bilingual education, and the basic aim is to reinforce indigenous identity in general, and later to adapt the contents to particular situations.

Problems

The indigenous movement of Ecuador is unfortunately giving priority to its participation in political areas such as elections and neglecting the real claims of indigenous people. This is a problem that might have repercussions in the next few years, and for the current leaders education has been relegated to second place.

Another problem is the fact that activity centres cannot rely on having equipment and staff teams. The change in conception from literacy to adult training presupposes financial and technical resources which are completely lacking in centres created for this purpose.

Owing to low income, community educators stay in their jobs only for a limited time – one or two years – in adult education. This has an impact

on the follow-up and consolidation of such education, and is detrimental to the overall training of the participants. It is urgent to increase the income which educators receive.

Another limitation is the management of time for adult educational programmes, because it is necessary to take account of periods of temporary migration to other regions or towns, as well as respecting the rhythm of daily activities. For that reason, flexible methods and part-time attendance seems to be appropriate in defining training periods and the duration of programmes.

Positive Steps

The major outcome of the literacy campaign in the eighties, under the government of Jaime Roldós, was literacy in Kichwa. As a result, dineib was created under the government of Rodrigo Borja in 1998. As a consequence, local programmes were boosted with the signature of agreements between indigenous organizations and the Ministry of Culture and Education. The purpose was to implement linguistic and pedagogical research, as well as to develop and produce didactic material for literacy, post-literacy, and for progressive training of personnel teaching in the indigenous languages of the country. However, this did not result in a reinforcement or consolidation of bilingual literacy.

In 1992 the National Congress reformed the Education Law by which bilingual intercultural education is given legal recognition. Technical, administrative and financial autonomy is given to dineib. Thus Ecuador is one of the first countries where indigenous peoples have this space for educational development.

Prospects

A strategic national plan must be the first action of dineib to strengthen literacy, starting with a campaign that could be similar to the earlier Leonidas Proaño campaign, stimulating the attendance of indigenous peoples in adult educational programmes, activity centres, craftwork training and literacy centres.

With the beginning of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) dineib and indigenous organizations should focus on participating in a range of discussions at regional, national and international levels, to allow indigenous peoples' voices and nationalities to be heard and discussed.

It is important that in future the inclusion of an indigenous vision continues. It must be expressed in community activities, in participants' daily lives, through old and wise indigenous people, and in the approaches of each cultural group. In this way, the community's participation contributes to a sustainable process of adult education.

International institutions must support adult education processes, especially in fields of material development, training of educators as well as other education personnel, and financing of staff and equipment for occupational training workshops.

Literacy as Freedom for Women in India

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Introduction

The ability to read and write is becoming a fundamental need in an increasingly technological and modern society. However, despite phenomenal growth of the formal educational systems in the past four decades and increase in literacy rates in most developing countries, the vast majority of the population has still remained illiterate. In the last decade, education of girls and women has come to the forefront of development planning. Investment in female education is perceived by the development planners (international and national) as a development imperative rather than a welfare issue. Despite concerted efforts to promote *Education for All* (efa) in the 1990s, women constitute a majority of non-literate population in the world.

According to unesco (2002:12-15), there were 862 million non-literates in the world in 2003, of which two-thirds are still women. The alarming fact is that the proportion of illiterate women has not changed since 1970. Women do participate in literacy programmes in disproportionately large numbers. Yet, the large-scale literacy programmes have not succeeded in making a dent into the dismal educational situation of the vast population of illiterate women. Why have "time-bound" literacy policy and programmes not come to grips with fundamental issues relating to illiteracy and specific educational needs of the women?

The general neglect of education of illiterate women could be attributed to the welfare orientation of the government towards women (Patel 1987), and lack of concerns among development planners to take into consideration factors that facilitate or hinder women's participation in literacy programmes (Lind 1992). In general, the government has attempted to improve the status and conditions of women through wel-

fare programmes, which emphasize their home-based and reproductive role in society. As a result, most adult literacy programmes for women have reinforced women's role as wives and mothers and ignored the productive role they play in society. Despite lip service to "integrating" women in the development process, women's education has been viewed in isolation. Seldom has an attempt been made to link women's education to the larger social and economic policies that impinge upon their educational needs. What are then offered to women are "safe" literacy programmes, which affirm the value of literacy within the context of accepted roles of women. The possibility that women might be interested in developing literacy skills as a way out of confining roles and relationships within the family or as a way to exert more control within their own lives, is underplayed in such programmes.

To meet the challenge of literacy in the 21st century, there is a need to critically review the existing literacy policies and programmes, and explore new visions and approaches. Amartya Sen, the Nobel prize-winning economist, has drawn our attention to the fact that development and freedom are two sides of the same coin (Sen 1999). He defines development not in terms of gross national product (gnp), but as the process of expanding the real freedoms to all people in society. In this perspective, freedom is central to the process of development. Literacy, the most fundamental form of education, is at the heart of this new process. This paper reflects on the approaches to literacy for women in India, the country with nearly one third of the world's illiterate female population.

Discussion in this paper is organized in six sections. The first section examines linkages between literacy and freedom from a gender perspective. The second section highlights the problems of female illiteracy in India. The next two sections examine the extent to which policy and

practice of adult literacy programmes in India are geared towards meeting gender concerns and needs of the vast population of illiterate women. Alternative approaches to women's literacy are briefly discussed in the fifth section. The final section highlights salient issues related to promoting "Literacy as Freedom" for women.

Literacy for What?

The significance of education of girls and women is well recognized by development planners due to multiple benefits that accrue to women and their families. Despite economic and social benefits derived from women's education, why do the vast majority of women in India and other developing countries continue to remain illiterate? We need to first understand what accounts for widespread illiteracy among women and then explore what kind of literacy women need for expanding freedoms.

Gender Subordination, Poverty and Literacy[1]

Illiteracy is not merely a problem due to lack of parental motivation to educate the girl child or a problem of access to education. It does not occur at random, but is typically the plight of poor and powerless people. Illiteracy is characteristically found among the rural poor, women and ethnic minorities, who have somehow missed the benefits of the existing expanded system of formal education. In developing countries, illiteracy is also widespread among people who do not speak official and standardized languages, which are often used in literacy programmes. Thus, illiteracy is essentially a manifestation of social inequality, the unequal distribution of power and resources in society.

What are the gender-related factors that contribute to and sustain female illiteracy? The feminist framework that helps us understand women's

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1 This section draws heavily from
Patel and Dighe (1997).

subordination in all spheres of women's life is useful in understanding why the vast majority of women in developing countries have remained uneducated. Stromquist (1990) argues that the gender division of labour and the control of women's sexuality reinforce women's subordination in society and influence women's educational participation and their educational aspirations. Patriarchal ideology plays an important role in defining gender roles. It emphasizes women's primary roles as mothers, wives and housewives. Social acculturation of men and women, sanctioned by religious and cultural practices, also reinforces gender division of labour, which is manifest in a wide range of requirements and taboos.

Men's control over women's sexuality is one of the key elements in the subordination of women. The control over women's sexuality is manifest in several norms, such as 'virginity, limited physical mobility, the penalization of abortion and the association of the use of contraceptives with sexual promiscuity' (Stromquist 1990:98). The practice of "purdah" or enforced physical separation of women from men upon reaching puberty also reflects controls over women's sexuality. The underlying rationale for such practice is that a woman's honour needs to be protected and that men are simultaneously the enforcers and the violators of the norms.

The social practice of early marriage of daughters, prevalent in many developing countries, affects both the parental view of level of education daughters need and women's aspirations for future education. When women marry early, the level of education considered adequate for marriage and motherhood is low. Similarly, women's inability to control the number and spacing of their children also affects their availability for learning and other social activities.

Illiteracy is intertwined with poverty. It is experienced mostly by poor and socially disadvantaged women, who are bound more severely by

patriarchal constraints. They spend considerable time for domestic and reproductive activities and work for survival in subsistence agriculture or in the informal sector, which unquestionably affects their educational participation. Thus, rural and poor women face constraints in terms of time, space and societal expectations for education.

Illiteracy among women is often attributed to their lack of motivation to participate in literacy programmes or to regularly attend literacy classes. Motivation for learning implies a great deal of autonomy for the individual. Poor women who daily struggle for survival do not have such autonomy.

Furthermore, physical, material and ideological obstacles also work against women's participation in literacy classes. Women's physical mobility, in general, is limited by patriarchal constraints. Social sanction is required from the family members and the community when a woman would like to attend a literacy class or participate in a group at the local level. Her limited social contacts with the outside world also become an important determining factor in shaping her chances to become literate. Limited social interaction leads to the internalization of a poor self-image and low self-esteem for learning. Given such patriarchal and structural constraints to women's literacy, what kind of literacy education do women need?

"Literacy as Freedom"

Development in Sen's perspective is not equated with economic growth, but it is perceived as enrichment of the prospects that people may have to live their lives and fulfil their capabilities. To achieve this, people require a number of basic freedoms such as economic capability, political freedom and basic security. Expansion of freedom is both the primary end and means of development. He argues that the actual capability

to achieve "development as freedom" is influenced by economic capabilities, political liberties, social facilities and the enabling conditions of basic education. Within this alternative vision of development, Sen advocates social development – enhanced literacy, accessible and affordable health care, empowerment of women and the free flow of information – as necessary precursors of economic development. He also emphasizes the significance of democratic and human rights to strengthen other types of freedoms. It is because of the interconnections between each type of freedom that empowered human agency emerges as the engine of development. While redefining 'development' as 'freedom', also gives centrality to basic education, particularly for women, for the expansion of freedoms.

According to Sen, not being able to read, write, count or communicate in today's world is in itself a basic form of human insecurity and deprivation. Good education and health as social opportunities are not only important in themselves and as enabling conditions to enter the market economy, but they can also directly enhance substantive freedoms for people. Therefore, education is central for the expansion of all forms of basic freedoms. Sen's basic argument for education is that 'with adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other'. This may be possible only if literacy is linked with issues of survival and empowerment, especially of women.

Sen does not perceive women as passive recipients of welfare, but emphasizes their active role as agents of social change and acknowledges the significance of women's political, social and economic roles in development.

...the limited role of women's active agency seriously afflicts the lives of all people – men as well as women, children as well as adults. ...the most immediate argument for focusing on women's agency may be precisely the role that such an agency play in removing the inequities that depress the well-being of women (Sen 1999:191).

According to him, women's earning power, economic roles outside the family, literacy and education, property rights and so on, strengthen women's agency through independence and empowerment. Within this perspective, the empowerment of women is one of the central issues in the process of development.

Literacy is central to the process of women's empowerment. Sen does not question the instrumental perspective of women's education that links education with fertility and child survival. However, in his advocacy for basic freedoms (including human rights) the tranformatory potential of women's education is evident.

In summary, "Literacy as Freedom" can be broadly interpreted as a process-oriented literacy that leads to empowerment. Literacy in this perspective is linked with all types of basic freedom – economic, political, social and cultural. It is envisaged to empower women to fight against gender inequalities in the family, community and society at large.

Illiteracy in India: A Female Phenomenon

In India, there has been considerable progress of literacy since Independence. The literacy rate for the total population has steadily gone up from 19.74 per cent in 1951 to 65.38 per cent in 2001[2] (Table 1). Literacy rates for the decade ending 2001 show encouraging trends. During the last decade (1991-2001), the literacy rate has recorded an increase of 13.17 percentage points, the highest increase in any one decade. The rate of growth of literacy in the decade ending 2001 has been higher in the rural areas at 14.75 per cent as compared to the 7.2

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2 Literacy rates for the Census of 2001 exclude entire Kach district, Morvi, Maliya-Miyana and Wankaner talukas of Rajkot district, Jodiya Taluka and Jamnagar District of Gujarat State and entire Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh where population enumeration of Census of India, 2001 could not be conducted due to natural calamities.

per cent increase in urban areas (Table 2). The growth rate of literacy has been higher for the female population at 14.87 per cent than for males at 11.72 per cent during this decade. The gender gap in literacy has also decreased from 24.84 percentage points in 1991 to 21.70 percentage points in 2001. Thus, the Census of 2001 gives us a very optimistic picture with regard to female literacy. However, there is still much that remains to be done.

Who have remained illiterate in India? Despite progress in the female literacy rates during 1991-2001, female illiterates constitute the largest illiterate population in India (Table 3). The magnitude of the problem of illiteracy can be assessed from the absolute number of illiterate women. 189.56 million girls and women are illiterate out of a total of 296.21 million (64 per cent). Distribution of female illiterates across various states also varies. Ten states and Union Territories added to the pool of female illiterates. There are 33 districts in the country having 800,000 and above female illiterates. Many of these districts are concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. Illiteracy is widespread among rural women.

The problem of illiteracy among adult women is exacerbated due to low enrolment and high drop-out rates among girls who enter the formal schools. While the enrolment of girls has gone up, it is still not commensurate with the enrolment rate of boys (Table 4). Gross enrolment ratio (ger), which represents school enrolment as a ratio of the total population in the age group of 6-14 years, have remained static for boys (6-11 years), and improved for girls (Table 4). However, for the ger of 90.3 per cent (98.5 per cent for boys and 81.5 per cent for girls) in primary education, the Net Enrolment Ratio (ner) comes to only 71 per cent

(77.7 per cent for boys and 64 per cent for girls). The drop-out rate among girls, particularly those who live in rural areas, continues to be very high (Nayar, 1993). Regions that have low ratios of female to male literacy also have significant disparities at the first level of education. Though overall figures for drop-out in primary schools do not show any significant gender difference (25.6 per cent for boys and 26 per cent for girls), ger for girls in the upper primary education is only 49.5 per cent for girls in comparison to 66.5 per cent for boys. In other words, girls are still at a disadvantage in the early stage of education. Relapse into illiteracy is high if girls do not complete the initial cycle of five years of primary education.

In summary, in the 21st century India faces the challenge of promoting literacy among the vast population of illiterate girls and women. What kind of literacy policy and programmes are implemented for educating them?

The Policy: Intentions and Action

A wide range of policy documents of the government express concerns over women's low status, poor health, high mortality and morbidity rates, declining sex ratio, and violence against women. The relationship between education of girls and women and other social development indicators is also well recognized by the government. Though there is a consensus among development planners about the need to enhance the status of women and improve their educational situation, there is a wide gap between the intentions and action. This section highlights salient aspects of the government policy on female education, particularly related to literacy.

Historical Antecedent

Sluggish progress of female education after independence in 1947 took place against the historical legacy of general neglect of educating them, particularly among the vast non-literate population. The indigenous system of education in pre-colonial India was characterized by a restricted spread of literacy in the general population. Access to education, was ascriptive in nature, conditioned predominantly by caste, religion and gender. Thus, in a highly hierarchical and inegalitarian pre-colonial society, access to literacy and higher learning was limited mostly to men from privileged sections of society. The colonial educational system was based on the foundation of the lopsided system of indigenous education.

In the early 19th century, efforts of the social reformers and the missionaries paved the way for the development of public female education and provided impetus to emergence of a group of educated women, who later became the vanguard of the early women's movement. In fact, education for women's equality was the first demand of the early women's movement that developed during 1920s and 1930s (Mazumdar 1987). Though educating the massive population of illiterates was not a major concern of the colonial government, introduction of the modern educational system by the colonial state extended educational opportunities to all, including women and lower castes who had been earlier neglected. However, it was the nationalist movement that laid the foundation of the principles of women's equality and provided some legal rights in social, economic, and political spheres for women (Patel 1998:160).

After independence, the Constitution of India, based on the liberal principles of equality and social justice, accepted education as the key instrument to translate the Constitutional guarantee of equal status and opportunities for women into reality. The major thrust of the government's

educational policy was on extending equal educational opportunity to all those who had been denied access to education so far. However, the sharp demarcation of public and private gender roles continued in educational policy even after independence.

International Commitments

The global agenda of human rights, articulated in several declarations, covenants and conventions of the United Nations from time to time, emphasizes specific concern for fulfillment of the right to education in general, and for the education of women in particular (Choudhary 2000). In the 1990s, the Government of India made several commitments related to *Education for All* (efa) in international conventions, such as Beijing (1995) and Beijing+5, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (cedaw), and the World Conference on Education for All at Dakar (April 2000). Education of girls and women is assigned priority in these international commitments. To what extent the Indian government has translated its intentions into action.

The Beijing *Declaration* (1995) states that member nations shall promote people-centred sustainable development … through the provision of basic education, life-long education, literacy and training, and primary health care for girls and women (No. 27). At Beijing (1995), the Government of India committed to several actions to promote gender equity.[3] One of them relates to increase in the education budget to 6 per cent of the gdp. The Beijing *Platform of Action* also makes several recommendations to promote female education:

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[3] Key actions proposed by the government were: 1. appointment of Women's Rights Commissioner to look into violations of women's rights; 2. formulation of a National Policy on Women; 3. setting up of mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the Beijing *Platform for Action* and 4. improved health care schemes for women and children.

1. to ensure equal access to education; 2. eradicate illiteracy among women; 3. improve women's access to vocational training, science and technology and continuing education; 4. develop non-discriminatory education and training; 5. allocate sufficient resources for and monitor the implementation of educational reforms, and 6. promote lifelong education and training for girls and women.

In practice, the government has not adequately responded to the Beijing *Platform of Action.* Though the government has committed to increase allocations to the education sector to 6 per cent of the gdp in various national policy documents, it has not succeeded in doing so. In 1997, the government spent only 3.62 per cent of the gdp on education. Nevertheless, plan allocations to elementary education and adult education have improved substantially in the 1990s, and girls and women have become important targets of basic education interventions of the government in the 1990s.

With the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (udhr) in 1948, the United Nations affirmed its belief in the dignity and faith of the human being and in the equal rights of men and women. The un reflects a special concern for fulfilment of the right to education in general, and for the education of women in particular. This is clearly articulated in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (cedaw), also known as the Women's Convention and the Women' Bill of Rights. It was adopted in the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 1979 and ratified by India in 1993. The cedaw condemns any form of discrimination against women[4] and affirms

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4 cedaw deals with gender discrimination in the areas of: Sex Role Stereotyping and Prejudice (Article 5); Trafficking in Women and Prostitution (Article 6); Equal Rights in Education (Article 10), International Labour Organisation (Aricle 11), Health (Aricle 12); and Marriage and Family Life (Article 16).

the agreement of all the signatory States to pursue appropriate means and a policy of eliminating discrimination against women. Specifically, Article 10 of the cedaw (1979) deals with the issue of women's education. It affirms that all the signatory States would adopt appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure them equal rights with men in the field of education. Thus, the human rights agenda of the cedaw on women's education is comprehensive. It advocates promotion of equality between men and women through equal access and achievement in education at all levels and for all forms of education including vocational, technical and professional education. Thus, the human rights agenda of the cedaw on women's education is comprehensive. It advocates promotion of equality between men and women through equal access and achievement in education at all levels and for all forms of education including vocational, technical and professional education.

It was the World Conference on *Education for All* (efa) at Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 that provided impetus to ensuring access to basic education and improvement in the quality of education for girls and women and advocated to eliminate all gender stereotyping in education. A mid-term review of efa commitments at Dakar in 2000 has drawn our attention to the gap between state public policy and the reality of educational provisions for girls and women. As a signatory to the Dakar *Framework of Action*, the Indian government has committed itself to the six goals, which encompass all aspects of basic education and lifelong learning, with a special emphasis on girls and women, and the elimination of gender disparities. In line with the commitments made in the efa declaration at Dakar, recently several concrete steps have been taken by the government for attainment of efa goals, for example, the introduction of the first National Programme for Universal Elementary Education

(Sarva Shikshan Abhiyan) and the expansion of the community-based literacy, post-literacy and continuing education (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2001). The government has committed to making adequate financial allocations for achievement of the goals of efa by 2015.

To what extent has the government taken actions to improve the dismal educational situation of girls and women in India? A critical review of the existing educational policy and programmes will shed light on the extent to which international commitments of the government for universalization of elementary education and promotion of adult literacy with specific focus of girls and women are operationalized.

The Policy Directives

In the last decade, education of girls and women has come to the forefront of development planning. Investment in female education is perceived as a development imperative rather than a welfare issue. The government policy reflects global development thinking, while accommodating some of the demands of the contemporary women's movement in India.

Government policy has kept pace with development thinking, moving from a welfare orientation to women's education, to one where women's productive and reproductive role is being given precedence over the 'general good' argument. From the early seventies the focus shifted to reducing fertility, improving infant and child mortality, encouraging better child rearing practices, etc. … While this remained the mainstay of government debates, the eighties saw an effort to accommodate the concerns thrown up by the women's movement, especially those relating to enhancing women's status by redefining education as a tool for women's empowerment.

It is interesting that policy documents from the eighties onwards have not only accommodated the 'demands' of the women's movement, but simultaneously retained both the early welfare orientation and the later mother-wife-reproducer rhetoric (Ramachandran 1998:79).

Thus, over the years there has been a gradual significant shift in the government policy on women's education. However, the gap between policy intentions and action has continued.

The National Policy on Education (npe), introduced in 1986 (Ministry of Human Resource Development 1986) and revised in 1992 (Ministry of Human Resource Development 1992a), is a major landmark in bringing girls' and women's education to the forefront of educational planning. It continues to emphasize removal of educational disparities by providing equal educational opportunity to those who had been earlier denied access to education. npe goes beyond this liberal approach to education, and envisages education as an instrument of women's equality and empowerment. The policy perceives education as an agent of basic change in improving the status of women and emphasizes women's education as an integral part of the overall strategy of securing equity and social justice in the educational system. To promote women's equality, the educational policy envisages the National Educational System to play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women.

The Programme of Action (1992) of the revised version the educational policy further articulates the need for gearing the entire educational system to address gender and regional disparities and proposes a multi-

pronged strategy for the empowerment of women[5] (Ministry of Human Resource Development 1992b). It advocates all actors, agencies and institutions in the field of education to be promote gender-sensitive interventions and ensure that women participate in all educational programmes and activities. Nonetheless, the policy retains the instrumentalist logic of relating education of girls and women to low fertility and child health among others.

The major thrust of the national policy on education has been on intervening within the education system in a piecemeal and ad hoc manner through special programmes without addressing larger socio-economic and cultural constraints that adversely influences participation of girls and women in the educational system. The policy assumes that improving the access of girls and women to education, elimination gender bias in school curricula without changing institutionalized practices, and vocational education and training would bring profound changes in the status of women.

Mahila Samakhya

In pursuance of the National Policy on Education (1986), the Department of Education attempted to translate the concepts of empowerment

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5 Specifically, the national educational system is envisaged to play a positive and interventionist role in the empowerment of women through: 1. development of new values through re-designed curricula, textbooks and the training and orientation of teachers, administrators and decision-makers at all levels; 2. promotion of women studies; 3. widening the access of women to vocational, technical and professional education at different levels while eliminating sex stereotyping in vocational and professional courses and promoting women's participation in non-traditional occupations and in existing and emergent technologies and 4. eradication of illiteracy among women and improving participation of girls in elementary education (Ministry of Human Resource Development 1992b).

and equality in practice through an innovative programme, *Mahila Samakhya*, in 1987 (Ministry of Human Resource Development 1988a). Initially, it was implemented in the states of introduced in 1987 by the Department of Education in the states of Gujarat, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh, then expanded to seven more states.

In the formative stage, those who were involved in conceptualizing the *Mahila Samakhya Programme* (msp) were also involved in implementation, training of functionaries and decision-making at all levels to translate the concept into practice.

The starting point in Mahila Samakhya is not imposing literacy or traditional education on women, but generating demand for literacy and education by linking literacy with empowerment. Women are allowed to seek education at a point when its meaning and value becomes evident to them. Education in the broad sense is used as a tool to facilitate the process of collective reflection and action through mahila sanghas (women's groups) and improve women's access to development resources and decision-making.

npe (1986) provided a separate and protected space for women's empowerment through the *Mahila Samakhya Programme.* However, such space within the state has remained limited. Although msp is now expanded to 10 states, it has still remained an externally-funded programme. No systematic efforts have been made to integrate msp's strategies for women's empowerment into other educational programmes. No mechanisms are created yet to systematically feed knowledge, generated through years of intensive work in msp, into other educational interventions. In other words, mainstreaming of msp within the educational system has not taken place.

Universalization of Elementary Education

Universalization of elementary education (uee) has been accepted as a national goal since 1950. The Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian Constitution (Article 45) urges the State to provide free and compulsory elementary education to all children up to the age of 14 years. However, the government has not succeeded yet in fulfilling its obligation. More recently, however, the Government of India has declared its intention to make education a fundamental right. Efforts to universalization of elementary education has been strengthened by the Supreme Court, which had ruled that the right to free and compulsory education for the 6-14 years age group was a fundamental right. Education of girls is assigned priority in efforts of universalization of elementary education. Despite clear linkages between education and empowerment of women, there is no clear commitment on the on the part of the government to recognize women's right to education.

It is the National Policy on Education (1986) that introduced a broad framework for uee, linking primary education and non-formal education, and enlarged the goal of uee to include provision of education of a satisfactory quality to all children. It also shifted the focus from enrolment to participation and retention of school children (6-14 years). According to the efa 2000 Assessment Country Report, there has been some improvement in educational participation of girls in elementary education (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2000). In recent years, reduction in the drop-out rate has been faster in the case of girls than for boys. This is attributed to the special attention given to education of girls in the educational policy, in general, and all efa projects in particular.

Since the late 1980s, several projects were initiated for promoting primary education, with special focus on girls, namely, the *Shiksha Karmi*

Project of Rajastahn (1987); the *Bihar Education Project* (1991); *Rajasthan Lok Jumbish* (1992), *Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Project* (1992) and *District Primary Education Programme* (1993). Some of these projects of basic education have introduced special interventions and incentives to improve the educational participation of girls. However, the focus of such efforts has remained piecemeal and ad hoc. Seldom efforts have been made to tackle systemic issues that reinforce gender inequality in education. A few non-formal education (nfe) projects have evolved innovative strategies to extend primary education to girls. however, in practice, nfe has remained a compensatory type of primary education for the rural poor.

National Literacy Mission
The National Policy on Education (1986) was a landmark in the history of adult literacy education as it articulated for the first time the national commitment to addressing the problem of eradication of illiteracy in a time-bound manner with planned, concerted and co-ordinated efforts. The policy also provided impetus to development of a mass approach to eradication of literacy with mass mobilization and support of divergent sections of society.

It was in pursuance of the mandate of the npe (1986) that the National Literacy Mission (nlm) was launched in 1988 (see Ministry of Human Resource Development 1988b). The nlm was conceived as a societal and technical mission with the objective of imparting functional literacy to 80 million non-literate adults in the productive age group of 15-35 years by 1995. It assigned priority to eradicating illiteracy among women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and other disadvantaged groups through mass mobilization and support of the wider sections of people. The nlm also suggested to incorporate women's equality as one of the core values in literacy curriculum to link literacy with women's empowerment. In practice, the nlm focused on using the campaign mode for

imparting literacy skills to non-literate learners, the majority of whom were women and paid very little attention to integrating gender concerns in planning and implementation of Total Literacy Campaigns (tl cs) (Dighe 1995).

Literacy is not a linear process. It is a continuing process of lifelong learning. nl m recognizes the significance of post-literacy and continuing education for sustaining literacy and envisages nationwide expansion of post-literacy and continuing education through new institutional structures, better utilization of the existing infrastructures, and open and distance learning. However, there was considerable delay in developing a feasible policy and programme of post-literacy and continuing education to promote functional literacy and lifelong adult learning beyond the literacy phase.

The time lag in planning and implementation of the post-literacy phase has serious consequences for the retention of the fragile literacy skills of the first generation of learners, particularly women. The gap in implementation of tl cs and post-literacy campaigns and programmatic approach to literacy also suggest that the government lacks the vision to develop an institutionalized system of delivering literacy, post-literacy and continuing education to neo-literates on a sustained basis.

In summary, elementary education has remained a priority for achieving efa goals. A few initiatives, such as Mahila Samakhaya Programme, have remained "islands of innovations." However, successful micro-initiatives have never been integrated into the mainstream. Unlike elementary education, the government has not paid adequate attention to developing an institutionalized and sustainable system of adult education in order to promote literacy and continuing education among men and women from the disadvantaged and marginalized sections of society. The nl m was

launched with a great deal of promise for promoting women's literacy. To what extent gender concerns of the nlm were addressed by the tlcs?

The Practice of Total Literacy Campaigns[6]
Introduction of the nlm in 1988 shifted the direction of the adult education programme from the centre-based approach to the campaign approach. The nlm introduced the Total Literacy Campaign (tlc) as a viable strategy for promoting literacy on a mass scale. tlc is an area-specific, volunteer-based and time-bound literacy programme, which advocates programme implementation through decentralized administrative and organizational structures. It uses the strategy of mass mobilization to generate social demand for literacy, while involving wider sections of society in promoting literacy. nlm assigned priority to women as a key target group and also identified women's equality as one of the core values in literacy curriculum to link literacy with women's empowerment. To what extent tlcs were geared towards these gender concerns of the nlm?

Women's Participation in Literacy Classes
tlcs provided tremendous opportunity for women to participate in literacy classes and campaign activities. It is now officially recognized that nearly 65-70 per cent of the learners in the tlcs were women. External evaluation was an integral part of the tlcs, however, its primary focus remained on assessing the quantitative targets of tlcs (i.e. number of learners made literate). Though most evaluation studies included women in the sample as learners and as volunteers/instructors, and sporadically highlighted sex differences in enrolment in literacy classes, no systematic efforts were made to examine the extent and nature of women's participation in tlcs. Nevertheless, evaluation of tlcs shows that women

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6 Discussion in this section draws heavily from Patel (2001:354-62).

do desire to participate in literacy programmes in disproportionately large numbers when favourable conditions are created to facilitate their participation.

What contributed to facilitating women's participation in literacy classes? The way literacy classes were organized provided an opportunity to a large numbers of women learners to meet, talk, share, and break their isolation, which is socially structured in their lives. A study of tlcs conducted by the Delhi Saksharata Samiti in Ambedkarnagar, a resettlement colony in South Delhi, by Dighe (1994a) shows that women learners had a strong desire to learn. They liked to go to the literacy classes because a literacy class gave them an opportunity to meet others and study collectively. Thus, literacy classes provided women learners with a social space, away from home, and offered them an opportunity to meet in a group to share their common experiences about work, family, and illness. Participation of women in literacy classes was also facilitated when literacy classes took into consideration constraints that poor women face in terms of time, space and social expectations.

These are undoubtedly some important aspects of the literacy campaign that facilitated women's participation in literacy classes. Large-scale social mobilization that is elicited by literacy campaigns obtains a "social sanction" for women's participation in literacy classes. Various patriarchal considerations that hinder their participation become at least temporarily inoperative as women come out of their homes and take part in the literacy campaigns with great enthusiasm.

Literacy Attainment among Women

Despite increased participation of women in literacy classes, there is very limited critical research on the level of literacy attainment among women. Most evaluation studies of tlcs report only sex differences in lit-

eracy attainment, but do not probe further variable levels of literacy acquired by men and women. Inflated statistics on the number of people made literate through tlcs undoubtedly conceal the variable levels of literacy reached by women.

Dighe (1994a) probes low performance among women in literacy tests in the Delhi Saksharata Campaign. The study showed that out of the 100 women who had supposedly completed the three ipcl primers, only 16 were able to reach the norm set by the nlm. Besides several practical problems associated with administration of the literacy test, lack of sustained post-literacy interventions appeared to have contributed to relapse into illiteracy among a sizeable number of women learners when the literacy test was administered. Furthermore, the study revealed that by and large women did not use literacy skills, particularly writing skills, in their everyday life. However, those with higher literacy scores were more likely to apply their newly acquired literacy skills in reading, writing and numeracy in their everyday life as compared to those with low literacy scores.

Thus, the time-bound and target-oriented literacy campaigns appears to have succeeded in enrolling a large number of women in literacy classes. But available evaluation studies do not shed light on retention of sustainable literacy among women.

Gender Bias in Content and Pedagogy

Content and processes used in literacy programmes play a very important role in either reinforcing patriarchal values and gendered roles or in questioning them. A few literacy campaigns, guided by progressive activists, made a conscious attempt to fight gender stereotypes and construct a positive image of women by introducing songs and plays in kalajathas (cultural programmes) and Samata (cultural group) that questioned patriarchy and

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by integrating progressive gender content in literacy primers (Sundaraman 1996:1196). However, most of literacy primers highlighted the patriarchal ideology and failed to promote critical understanding of women's subordination in society.

A detailed analytical study of literacy primers used in the six states of Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh during tlcs shows how gender ideology is constructed in literacy primers through stereotyped images and themes (Dighe, Patel and Others 1994). It reveals that the content of literacy primers neither challenges the existing gender division of labour nor questions discriminatory practices against women in society. In general, the visuals and the text of the literacy primers emphasize women's domestic and reproductive role and make their productive role in society invisible. Even when women are shown as engaged in economic activities, their economic participation is presented as supplementary or secondary. Concerns of men and women as protagonists also reflect stereotypical gender roles in society.

To what extent was gender ideology or progressive gender content manifest in literacy primers transmitted to women learners by literacy instructors? We know very little about pedagogy and methods that were used in tlcs to impart literacy to women learners. The study of women learners in the Ambedkarnagar tlc in New Delhi reveals that despite tlc training to literacy instructors that emphasized participatory teaching-learning process, the literacy instructors, who were mostly young and inexperienced school students, felt more comfortable in using the formal methods of teaching literacy (Dighe 1994a). Even discussions on any of the themes of ipcl literacy primers were minimal. In other words, the main emphasis remained on imparting rudimentary literacy skills in reading, writing, and numeracy to the learners through conventional literacy teaching methods. This was because translation of a theme (expressed in

words or sentences) into sustained dialogue, requires skills that the literacy instructors did not have. As most of the literacy volunteers were school students, their youth and relative inexperience in life also mitigated against the use of other non-traditional methods of teaching.

In summary, the ipcl curriculum has emphasized 'women's equality' as a core value. In practice, however, no serious efforts have been made to translate this value into the content or pedagogy of literacy primers. In general, gender bias has persisted in literacy primers and not questioned critically by the young and inexperienced literacy instructors.

Women's Empowerment in TLCs

Did literacy imparted through tlcs lead to women's empowerment? The impact of tlcs on women is neither studied systematically nor captured by evaluation studies. Nonetheless, there is some sporadic evidence on how women's participation in literacy campaigns contributed to empowering them.

The tlc in Pudukkottai district (Tamil Nadu), launched in July 1991, was a meticulously planned and executed campaign by the women district collector, to address specific needs and problems of women in the district.[7] Apart from providing basic literacy skills, a conscious effort was made to empower women learners by providing them training in a range of skills so that they could have access to assets and credits, and handle local problems and conflict situations (Rao 1993).

Besides literacy, functionality and awareness, the cycling campaign for women's mobility was an integral part of the literacy campaign in

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[7] For a detailed discussion on the tlc in Pudukkotai district, refer to Athreya and Chunkath (1996).

Pudukkottai district so that improvement in physical mobility of women could enable them to perform their daily chores more efficiently. At the same time, learning of a skill, such as cycling, was envisaged to give women freedom and self-confidence to overcome physical and cultural barriers to move around on their own and explore the outside world. Thus, the cycling campaign within the tlc was perceived as a means of empowering rural women.

To what extent did the cycling campaign contribute towards empowerment of women? How far was it sustained? Within a few months of the cycling campaign, more than 50,000 women in the district learnt how to ride a cycle. Many songs were composed on cycling by rural women. A cycling tour by 11 girls across the district in 1995 also re-motivated many women to learn to cycle. A study of the impact of the cycling campaign on women's lives in 1999 reveals that cycling could be one of the effective strategies for empowering women (Rao 1999). Though many women do not own cycles or control the use of cycles, their access to cycles and their usage have increased. For women, cycling has become an efficient and cheap way of meeting their daily transport needs for invisible and unpaid household or social tasks. The increased physical mobility of women has also contributed to their self-esteem and self-confidence. tlcs in Mandaya district (Karnataka) and Madhepura district (Bihar) also tried to emulate the cycling campaign of Pudukkottai district and met with considerable success (Sundaraman 1996:1196).

Another case of women's empowerment in the context of tlc is that of the anti-arrack (country liquor) agitation in Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh (Dighe 1994b). In one of the villages of Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh, women learners of the literacy class discussed their sufferings due to alcoholism among men. They organized together

and stopped the vending of arrack (country liquor) in the village. A lesson in the post-literacy that describes an incident that had actually taken place in a village.[8] This lesson ignited the minds of women learners of other villages and sparked an anti-arrack agitation against the sale of arrack in Nellore district. Rural women spearheaded the agitation. It was the forging of links of spontaneous protest of rural women with mass organizations (political parties, voluntary organizations, women's groups, and civil liberties organizations) that sustained and even intensified the agitation (Ilaiah 1992). Participation in the agitation empowered women, and made them more confident and articulate. As a result, the government introduced the ban on arrack in early 1993 in Nellore district. But total prohibition of arrack was withdrawn in early 1997.

This success in having the arrack banned generated considerable euphoria among women in Nellore district. In the aftermath of the anti-arrack movement, rural women organized Podupalakshmi groups (saving and credit groups) and started saving and rotating credit for consumption and production (Ramachandran 1998:122-24).[9] Initially, the government also supported thrift and credit groups by linking them to a few rural development programmes. However, given the limited agenda of the literacy campaigns, the government did not succeed in linking literacy with survival and sustaining women's empowerment.

Thus, literacy per se was not the main vehicle for empowerment of women learners in tlcs in Pudukkottai or Nellore district. Literacy class-

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8 Refer to Shatrugna (1992) for a brief discussion on how a literacy campaign in Nellore district contributed to the anti-arrack agitation.

9 The credit co-operatives also spilled over to other districts (for example, Kanyakumari, Ramanathapuram, Madurai, etc.) and in few places thrift groups capital led to income generation activities by women (Sundaraman 1996:1195-96).

es created social spaces for women to interact. However, women's empowerment occurred primarily due to the tlc's strategy of mobilization. The large-scale mobilization of women instructors and organizers during literacy campaigns through Kalajathas also offered opportunity to empower them (Sundaraman 1996). Environment building for literacy campaigns inducted 100,000 educated girls and women from rural and urban areas into literacy work and gave them first hand experience in working on social issues along with men in the public sphere. Touring troupes of women cultural activists in Samata was also an empowering experience.

In summary, gender concerns have not been consciously built in either the planning or the implementation phase of literacy campaigns. In general, tlcs have focused on imparting basic literacy skills (reading, writing and numeracy) to learners, most of whom were women. In a few case, tlcs created some opportunities for empowering women by linking literacy with survival issues. However, tlcs have hardly paid any attention to addressing specific issues related to women's literacy.

Women's desire to become literate is evident from high enrolment of women in tlcs. Nearly 60 per cent of learners in tlcs were women. However, the government failed to capitalize on the gains of tlcs to generate creative strategies and resources for sustaining women's literacy. Considerable delay in formulating and implementing feasible post-literacy and continuing education policies and programmes has adversely affected retention of fragile literacy skills.[10] However, efforts are seldom linked to literacy with survival strategies and empowerment. Even

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10 Refer Patel (2001: 377-84) for a detailed discussion on the policy and practice of post-literacy and continuing education.

when neoliterate women were organized into groups in a few states after completion of tlcs, they were used primarily by the district administration for channelling development interventions. Hardly any attention was paid to promoting continuing education and lifelong learning among them. Lack of effective strategy of post-literacy and continuing education can be interpreted as lack of political will to promote sustainable literacy on a mass scale.

Alternative Approach to Women's Literacy

The powerful role of formal education in reinforcing social and gender inequalities is recognized by those who are working towards creating an empowering form of education for poor women. However, while criticizing traditional educational and training programmes that focus merely on imparting literacy skills and knowledge, women activists and organizations working with poor men or women at the grassroots have attempted to redefine women's literacy for empowerment (Bhasin 1984; Ramdas 1990).

Notwithstanding the dominant approach to literacy policy and programmes, in the 1980s several innovative educational programmes and projects of governmental and non-governmental organizations attempted to promote empowering education among poor and non-literate women, while taking into consideration structural and personal constraints that influence women's access to education.[11]

There is, however, a significant difference between the strategies of conventional literacy programmes and empowerment-oriented education for women.

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11 For example, the Women's Development Programme of the Government of Rajasthan, Mahila Samakhya, a government programme in Gujarat, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, Kutch Mahila Vikar Sanghatan (Gujarat), Deccan Development Society (Andhra Pradesh), and sutra (Himachal Pradesh).

Linking Literacy with the Process of Empowerment

The focus of empowering literacy is not on the mechanical transfer of literacy skills and knowledge. Empowering education is redefined as a process, which does not necessarily have to begin with literacy. It is perceived as a dynamic process of learning in which women gain access to knowledge and skills to critically reflect on their social reality and take collective action to transform it (see Box 1). Literacy is perceived as a strategic intervention for empowering women in the wider struggle against inequality and injustice in society. Literacy for poor women is essentially advocated as a means for acquiring knowledge and skills through which they begin to understand and analyse unequal gender relations in society, and change the nature and direction of systemic forces that marginalize them. Thus, literacy and education are perceived as a critical component of the strategy for women's empowerment. It is assumed that such education would enable women to obtain access to the intellectual and human resources they need to transform the material and social conditions of their existence.

Box 1: Education for Survival and Empowerment

The approach followed in some successful projects for empowering women provides insights into linking education with survival and empowerment:

• Acquiring self-confidence and self-esteem; walking with one's head held high, with dignity;

• Learning to negotiate and deal with authority, at home, in the community, in institutions
  (government, NGO, and private), and in official structures;

• Ability to reach out to knowledge about laws, entitlement, schemes and programmes for   the poor, one's own body, about health and the like; in short, expanding one's horizon;

• Ability to apply that knowledge in daily life;

• Acquiring skills to enhance one's income, labour productivity, literacy, numeracy

Empowering education is perceived as a process that values traditional knowledge and the experiences of women. Awareness-building, social analysis, critical reflection and organizational skills for mobilization are an integral part of these educational strategies. A transformatory form of education goes hand in hand with the mobilization strategies in order to bring sustainable changes in women's lives. Hence, strategies for women's empowerment are linked with organizational strategies for mobilization. Women's groups (mahila sanghas) form the nuclei for the process of empowerment. The role and process of building women's collectives is emphasized throughout the educational process.

Literacy is not a felt need for women, who struggle for survival. Enabling women to acquire life skills for survival and empowerment along with mechanics of reading, writing and counting can be a daunting task. Most successful strategies link literacy to broader processes of women's empowerment and weave literacy inputs in all aspects of the programme (see Box 2).

Creating the Environment for Learning

Given socio-cultural and psychological barriers to women's participation in educational activities, motivating women for learning is the first step. tlcs used the strategies of social marketing to mobilize volunteers for literacy work and generate demand for literacy. Mobilization strategies included both traditional forms of communication – kalajathas, door-to-door survey, rallies, mass meetings – and modern mass media (television, and radio spots and newspapers). Mahila Samakhya also generated demand for literacy and education by linking literacy with empowerment. For example, in Mahila Samakhya in Banda district the process of empowerment contributed to creating demand for literacy among women. When the programme started, literacy was not felt to be a need. Women

Box 2: Critical Elements of a Literacy Programme in an Empowerment Process

Case studies of effective literacy inputs in women's empowerment processes indicate several important features that must be built into such programmes:

Literacy is most relevant and effective when the demand for it comes from an ongoing process of consciousness-raising and organisation among women;

The strategy (whether camp, campaigns or centre-based approach) must be designed and implemented to break some of the traditional forms and structures, namely:

• blur hierarchy of power between `teacher' and 'learner'.

• demystify literacy as something attainable by anyone; de-link literacy and intelligence;

• value women and their knowledge; build their self-esteem;

• be flexible and responsive to women's pace of learning and link it closely to women's lives and experiences;

• emphasize collective learning and two-way learning;

were interested in issues of "survival" – drinking water, rations, minimum wages, minor forest produce and violence. However, there was demand for information relating to these issues. This information led to collective action by women. It was when the women started to interact regularly with structures of power and governance that they began to see value in literacy. They needed to write applications and access official documents. The inability to read and write gave rise to apprehensions about being cheated by the powers to be. The women who had been trained as hand pump mechanics required literacy skills to maintain records of spare parts, repairs and depth of bores. These new roles that women were entering made them recognize the value of literacy (Nirantar 1997: 8).

Thus, mobilizing and motivating women for learning is the first step in creating a learning environment.

For women learners, who come for learning for the first time, creating a non-threatening environment is most crucial. Low and irregular attendance in literacy centres is a chronic problem that women learners face due to childcare, housework and other survival tasks. The Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan (Srivastava and Sharma 1991, Patel 1991) and Mahila Samakhya Programme in Banda district in Uttar Pradesh (Nirantar 1997: 8-9) used residential literacy camps as an effective strategy for women's literacy, while taking into consideration gender constraints that they face to participate in literacy centres (see Box 3). The literacy camps allow women to learn in an environment free from the pressures of their domestic and reproductive work and responsibilities, and other work related to their livelihoods.

Box 3: Literacy Camp: A Strategy for Women's Literacy

Vishakha, a small NGO working for women's education and research in Rajasthan, was the first one to conduct a unique experiment in promoting women's literacy through a literacy camp. A study of a 10-day literacy camp for sathins, (village-level functionaries of the Women's Development Programme) in Rajasthan by Vishakha shows how literacy camp is used as an effective strategy for imparting literacy to rural women (Patel 1991:68-70):

In contrast to the centre-based approach to literacy education, in which learning takes place in a fragmented manner, the camp provided women learners an opportunity for continuous and intensive learning. For the learners who came from a virtually non-literate milieu, the camp created a 'world of literacy' in which learning could be fun.

Participatory and flexible approach to teaching and learning was effective in facilitating the process of literacy acquisition. Though acquiring literacy is basically an individual activity, the camp placed emphasis on the collective process of learning. Group affirmations played an important role in promoting learning. The word-centred approach of teaching literacy enabled learners not only to learn alphabets, but also in creating new words. Use of familiar key words and the local dialect in the initial stage of learning was effective. As the learning of alphabets and formation of simple words and sentences was simultaneous, the pace of learning was fast. The learner-centred approach to teaching created supportive teaching-learning situation in which learning became non-threatening experience for learners.

Trainers made conscious attempts to create a stimulating literacy environment for learners. Display of names, alphabets and creation of akhabar

A supportive and non-threatening environment, generated through the use of literacy games, songs and innovative exercises, collective processes of learning, and a participatory approach to the development of literacy material contribute to building women's self confidence for intensive learning and make acquisition of literacy skills an enjoyable experience. A high teacher-learner ratio also ensures attention to individual learners and an improved pace of learning. Moreover, the literacy camps foster self-learning as learners will have to reinforce and develop their skills after returning home.

The centre-based approach to literacy could also be effective for women who are unable to leave their homes, if literacy classes are conducted at a suitable time, and innovative teaching-learning methods and learner-centred materials are used.

Developing a Gender-Sensitive Curriculum

Existing material for readers with rudimentary literacy levels do not deal with subjects, which are of interest and relevance to adults. Gender-sensitive content and curriculum as well as processes used in literacy education play a very important part in sustaining their motivation for learning and enabling them to develop critical understanding of their social reality. The experience of Nirantar, a resource group that works closely in collaboration with field-based ngos in the area of women and education in developing and transacting a gender-sensitive curriculum for adult rural women in Banda district in Uttar Pradesh offers useful insights (Nirantar 1997).

Nirantar developed the curriculum in collaboration with Mahila Samakhya Banda for a residential educational centre, known as Mahila Shikshan Kendra (msk) to provide rural women with a broad-based

educational programme beyond literacy. Education was imparted to 28 women and girls in three six-monthly terms from January 1995 to December 1996. In developing the curriculum, Nirantar drew upon its experience of gender training, and of production and dissemination of reading material for neo-literate women. It used the broad-based criteria of relevance and usefulness for deciding about the content.

Besides strengthening literacy and numeracy skills, the msk curriculum focused on 'developing an information-base and the critical abilities of women so that they could deal with the world from a position of strength' (Nirantar 1997:23). Selection of content, teaching methodology, and material preparation for the msk curriculum was based on three principles. First, the curriculum should be responsive to the lived reality of learners and should recognize their own understanding, knowledge and experiences. Second, it should be holistic and should not be divided into traditionally defined content areas, as adult learning is neither a compartmentalized nor a linear process. Third, the curriculum develop-ment process should be guided by feminist understanding in order to integrate gender perspective into all content areas and to make visible socio-cultural and economic experiences of women. A non-hierarchical, non-didactic and non-judgemental methodological approach was advo-cated for teaching so that women's ways of expressing themselves is given adequate space and legitimacy. While keeping in mind this broader approach to curriculum development, competencies were worked out. Though equivalency with the formal educational system was considered, it was not binding.

The curriculum was developed around the basic issues – land, water, forest, society and health – which structure women's lives in Banda district. Besides deepening understanding of women's immediate environ-ment, the curriculum also dealt with other issues to expand their hori-

zons and provide them with information beyond their lived experiences so that they understand systems of social stratification and recognize that the traditional structures within which they live are not "natural" but socially determined. The curriculum tried to integrate micro-level realities of the village (social, economic and political) with a macro understanding of these issues. It also attempted to help learners develop a critical perspective on how the state and its development policies and plans, legislation, and system of representation impact upon their lives.

For teaching languages, Nirantar used a bilingual approach, using a mix of local language and standard Hindi. It placed emphasis on self-expression and creativity. Initially, language teaching was linked with information provided in key content areas. Such an approach was not workable as reading the written material on complex issues of the curriculum was essential. Hence, later on language teaching was de-linked from information session. On the other hand, the mathematics curriculum was built on the existing numeracy skills of learners and focused on imparting relevant and functional numeracy skills, equivalent to grade 5. Teaching of mathematics was linked with other content areas as far as possible.

The content was transacted through interactive sessions, while using innovative methods and material – interactive exercises, simulation games, games, riddles, role plays, discussion and debates, songs, films, visual representations (diagrams, timeline, village mapping, etc.) models, demonstration and field visits.

Unlike the trained school teachers in the formal educational system, teaching at msk was undertaken by the sahelis with a low level of formal education in rural schools. They had limited knowledge of key content

areas. They were neither confident about their teaching abilities nor familiar with teaching methodologies beyond basic literacy teaching. However, intensive inputs were given to empower them and build their capabilities for effective teaching.

Nirantar's experience in developing a gender-sensitive curriculum for the msk was an intensive process, which may not be replicable. However, the principles, content and methodologies can be used for promoting women's literacy.

Using an alternative approach to literacy for women's empowerment raises several issues that require deeper reflection on the content and approach (Nirantar 1997). Use of different educational strategies for women's literacy requires flexible and responsive structures and roles. Nirantar's experience with msk suggests that it is possible to train local women functionaries with a low level of education as teachers. However, intensive inputs are required to empower them along with learners and to build their capability for teaching. A decentralized approach is needed to respond to the emerging learning needs of both instructors and learners. Empowering education requires continuous efforts to build among women critical understanding of their social reality through a collective process of learning and reflection. Use of local knowledge, local language and learner-centred material and teaching-learning processes contribute to enabling learners to critically examine their lives and develop skills to confidently negotiate the world around them.

In summary, unlike conventional target-oriented literacy programmes, empowerment-oriented literacy education for women is a process of collective learning. For poor rural women, whose lives are conditioned by the existing socio-cultural and economic context, mere transfer of litera-

cy skills is not effective. Education and skills that enable them to meet their livelihood needs and negotiate their access to resources in their immediate environment have special significance for them. The challenge before the educational planners is to mainstream the approach of innovative educational programmes of ngos in order to link literacy with survival and empowerment.

Concluding Remarks

The Census of 2001 in India reveals encouraging trends with regard to female literacy. Female literacy rate has increased at a faster rate (11 per cent) than male literacy (9 per cent) and for the first time the number of literates outnumber the illiterates. Notwithstanding progress in extending basic education to girls and women, quality and sustainability of literacy are the key concerns. Total Literacy Campaigns have succeeded in mobilizing women and motivating them for learning. However, opportunities for continued learning are limited and sporadic. Given the magnitude of female illiteracy and widespread regional disparities in India, it is extremely important to bring literacy back on to the efa agenda. To promote gender-sensitive and participatory approach to literacy will not only require political will on the part of the state and civil s ociety, but also far more resources (human and financial) for literacy interventions. A wide range of social, cultural and economic factors that constrain women's access to knowledge, information and skills are well recognized by development planners and educationists. However, adult education programmes in practice have been converted into time-bound, target-oriented literacy programmes for imparting rudimentary literacy skills (reading, writing and numeracy) and some functional knowledge and information about various areas of development (for example, environment, health and hygiene). Such literacy education for women is perceived as an instrument to reduce their fertility, improve child rearing

practices, enhance and nutritional status and among others. The complex linkages between socio-structural and personal constraints faced by illiterate women cannot be tackled through such a target-oriented approach. What is needed is a gender-sensitive approach to literacy planning and implementation. It requires concerted efforts to change the mindset on the part of both the government and civil society.

Such literacy education is built on the rich knowledge, practices and experiences of women to enable them to expand their choices and encourage them to think critically and reflect on their social reality so that they can become active agents of their own transformation and embark on the path of self-learning. Empowering literacy should enable poor women and men to acquire knowledge and skill so that they could negotiate in this unequal world from the position of strength.

Literacy per se is of little relevance to poor women. However, literacy and education can be powerful tools to provide them with the very means of breaking out of the vicious cycle of powerlessness, poverty and marginalization. In the 21st century development planners and educators face the challenge of harnessing the emancipatory potential of literacy and education by building upon rich knowledge, skills, experiences and practices of people and communities at the grassroots.

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Table 1 **Progress of Literacy in India by Sex (1951-2001)**

Literacy Rate (Percentage)

Year	Total	Male	Female	Gender Gap* (%)
1951	19.74	29.00	12.82	16.18
1961	30.11	42.96	16.32	26.64
1971	36.49	48.92	23.00	25.92
1981+	43.56	56.37	29.75	26.62
1991+	52.11	63.86	39.42	24.44
2001	65.38	75.85	54.16	21.69

Figures indicate percentage to the corresponding population aged seven years and above.
The gender gap is indicated by the difference between the literacy rate of male and female.
+ The literacy rates for 1981 exclude Assam and for 1991 exclude Jammu and Kashmir,
where the census could not be conducted.
Source: Bose (2001:34).

Table 2 Progress of Literacy in India by Sex (1951-2001)

2.1 Literacy Rate* (Percentages)

Year	Total	Male	Female
1951 (5+ years)			
Rural	12.10	19.02	4.87
Urban	34.59	45.60	22.33
Total	18.33	27.16	8.86
1961 (5+ years)			
Rural	22.50	34.30	10.10
Urban	54.40	66.00	40.50
Total	28.30	40.40	15.35
1971 (5+ years)			
Rural	27.90	48.60	15.50
Urban	60.20	69.80	48.80
Total	34.45	45.96	21.97
1981 (7+ years)			
Rural	36.00	49.60	21.70
Urban	67.20	76.70	56.30
Total	43.57	56.38	29.76
1991 (7+ years)			
Rural	44.70	57.90	30.60
Urban	73.10	81.10	64.00
Total	52.21	64.13	39.29
2001 (7+ years)			
Rural	59.40	71.40	46.70
Urban	80.30	86.70	73.20
Total	65.38	75.85	54.16

(1) Literacy rates for 1951 refer to effective literacy rates and the break up of rural, urban and male-female components are crude literacy rates. (2) Literacy rates for 1981 exclude Assam whereas the 1991 literacy rates exclude Jammu and Kashmir where Census could not be conducted due to disturbed conditions. (4) Literacy rates for Census of 2001 exclude the entire Kuccchh district and three talukas of Rajkot district, one talukas of Jamnagar district in Gujarat and the entire Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh where population enumeration of Census of 2001 could not be conducted due to natural calamities.
Source: Government of India (2001).

Table 3 Magnitude of Illiteracy by Sex and Region (1981-2001)

Number of Illiterates* (in millions)

Year	Total	Male	Female
1981**	305.31 (56.4)	122.40 (43.6)	182.91 (70.2)
1991+	332.29 (47.9)	130.15 (36.1)	202.14 (60.6)
2001	296.21 (34.51)	106.65 (24.04)	189.56 (45.72)

Figures in parentheses indicate percentage to the corresponding population
(7 years and above). Figures for 1991 are based on the estimated population
(7 years and above).

** Excludes Assam where the 1981 Census was not held.
 + Excludes Jammu and Kashmir, where the 1991 Census
    was not held.
    Source: Prem Chand (1992: 5), and Government of India (2001).

Table 4 Educational Participation of Girls in Primary Education (1997-1998)

Indicators	Boys	Girls	Total
Gross Enrolment Ratio			
Primary Education - Class I-V (6-11 Years)	98.5	81.5	90.3
Upper Primary Education - Class VI-VIII (11-14 Years)	66.5	49.5	58.5
1.1.1 Net Enrolment Ratio			
Primary Education (6-11 Years)	77.7	64	71.1
2.1.1 Drop out Rate			
Primary Education (6-11 Years)	25.6	26	25.8

Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development (2000).

Literacy, Education and Women's Empowerment

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'Development does not start with goods; it starts with people and their education, organization and discipline.'

— e.f. Schumacher

1 The Context

Discrimination and inequality continue to dominate the discourse of gender equality and advancement of women for they are universal and formidable barriers to the realization of women's human rights. 'Ignorance is bliss', as the saying goes, and many men and women take it for granted that the unequal power relations between men and women are a natural way of life and go through life without questioning the oppression that women are subjected to. We now know that these unjust and unequal conditions are not pre-ordained or naturally occurring, but that they are nurtured by discriminatory traditional beliefs and practices emanating from the social system of patriarchy.

It is precisely this discrimination against girls and women that has historically disadvantaged them in securing for themselves the status and position in society to negotiate a better life for themselves. South Asia is known as the classic belt of patriarchy. Nepal is the only South Asian country without criminal law provisions to deal with domestic violence and the situation is exacerbated by women's absence from decision-making. This is symptomatic of the patriarchal system that relegates women to the residual category of society and views them as commodities to be dealt with at will. Nepal has the lowest literacy rate in the region – one out of every five adult women is literate – and the gender gaps in literacy and primary net enrolment are the region's highest, as education is not considered a priority for the daughter who will ultimately have to be a home-maker. Early marriage is the norm and statistics indicate that upon marriage 40 per cent of girls are less than 14 years old.

Maternal mortality in Nepal is highest in the world – 475 per 100,000 live births; less than 10 per cent of births are attended by trained personnel, 50-60 per cent of pregnant women are anaemic, and 50 per cent of maternal deaths are caused by illegal and unsafe induced abortion. Maternal mortality has severe consequences — the death rate for the surviving boy doubles, while for the girl it is quadrupled. Nepal is the only country in the world where women's life expectancy is lower than that of men. Women are made to live a vicarious existence within the confines of the four walls of the house by controlling their sexuality, access to opportunities, mobility and command over resources. Even if she ventures outside her home discrimination persists in job opportunities and wages. Irrespective of the fact that women form the majority of the total currently active population, they spend much more time than men on subsistence activities and domestic work. Furthermore, a large proportion of women work as unpaid family workers, and in general in the informal sector, which goes unreported and is not protected by legislation.

With the increasing feminization of poverty, it is but natural that migration in search of better livelihoods provides a viable means for women to extricate themselves out of poverty. But in the name of protecting women from violence the government has banned Nepali women from going abroad for employment. Such protectionist policies have made women extremely vulnerable to being trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation, hiv/aids or being forced to work in slavery-like conditions as domestic workers. Women and girls are ill equipped to question the violations they face in the family, society and by the state. Traffickers can easily deceive them. Furthermore, the neglect and abuse of the girl child during childhood are linked to the low status of women. If girls are given equal opportunities to develop their fullest potential they are more likely to be transformed into empowered women.

Increasingly, the terms, "empowerment" and "development" are being used interchangeably as if to mean that development per se will empower the target beneficiaries especially women and particularly poor women. In this regard, the definition of the term "empowerment" should be understood to have four basic components:[1]

- women's sense of internal strength and confidence to face life;

- the right to determine choices;

- the power to control their own lives within and outside the home; and

- the ability to influence the direction of social change towards the creation of a more just social and economic order nationally and internationally.

If this definition is to be translated into practice, the term "empowerment" itself demands closer scrutiny. The concept of power is central – who controls, dominates, decides and has access to resources? In every society power is dynamic and relational, operating within an ideology which justifies and perpetuates the existing patterns of control and distribution of resources, thus making one group of people more powerful and the other less powerful. Nevertheless, the survival of the powerful depends on the acquiescence of the powerless. This may be initially achieved through coercive means or threat of coercion, but soon the ideologues of the dominant group take over and are supported by social, economic, legal, political and religious institutions and structures. For example, preference for sons rather than for daughters is sanctioned by the religious Hindu text, *Garud Puran*, which is chanted on the occasion of the bereavement of a family member. It dictates, 'A family without any issue, and most specifically without a son, shall go to hell.'

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1 Asian and Pacific Centre for Women and Development, 1979.

Surely nobody in their right mind would want to go to hell Women's *raison d'être* is therefore, reduced to producing a son and thus act as insurance for a berth in heaven. This seemingly non-negotiable aspect has perpetuated the unequal gender relations between men and women by maintaining men's overall control over resources whether it is in the private or the public sphere.

2 Literacy and Women's Empowerment

Stephen Lukes has described three distinct notions of power with regard to decision-making – power to, power over and power within – whether it be individual or institutional. It is the power within individuals and the mobilization of that power collectively that has challenged the *status quo* and brought down the most mighty and powerful despots. It is this power within and the power to act collectively that both literacy and education can ignite to reverse the sufferings of humanity. To that effect literacy and education can be powerful tools to redress unequal power relations, discrimination and the structural violence, including poverty, that women face in their daily lives. As care-givers, poor women are too busy and preoccupied working and making a living for the survival of their families. In fact, poor women do not see the relevance of literacy in their daily struggle to make ends meet. Forcing women to attend literacy classes at the end of the day when they are completely exhausted does little to promote literacy and *Education for All*. Experience has shown that only when literacy serves to open a gateway out of their impoverishment and to address issues that have been identified by the women themselves, will they be motivated to join literacy classes voluntarily. One of the most popular approaches has been the conscientization path developed in Latin America by Paulo Freire. This was also influenced by the Gramscian theory which stresses the need for participatory and democratic functioning in society in order to create a more equitable and non-

exploitative order. Known as Popular Education, the process seeks to turn literacy into a political act through a learning-teaching format where, instead of rote learning, issues that impact their lives – wages, loans, disease, abandonment, violence, desperation – are discussed and analysed in developing alternatives. Thus, by drawing on the only resource they have, that is the capacity to resist and transform injustice through their collective strength, they challenge the structure and the distribution of entitlements. Many non-governmental organizations (ngos) have evolved their own approaches:

1. To unambiguously take the standpoint of women.

2. To demonstrate to women and men how gender is constructed socially, that gender relations are not sacrosanct and can be changed. This could involve showing through the lived experience of the participants how women and men are gendered through class, race, religion and culture, among other things.

3. To investigate collectively the specifics of how class, caste, race and gender intersect at particular moments, in particular ways for particular people, in particular localities, in order to deepen collective understanding about these relationships and through this create new knowledge.

4. To build collective and alternative visions for relations between women and men. The negative consequences of the current situation for men and women needs to be emphasized.

5. To deepen collective analysis of the context and the position of women in it, locally, nationally, regionally and globally, in order to formulate particular strategies for change.

6. To develop analytical tools which participants can use to evaluate the effects of certain development strategies for the promotion of women's strategic interests.

7. To assist participants to strategize in order to bring about change in their personal and organizational lives in the most effective ways.

8. To help women develop the skills to assert themselves confidently and to challenge oppressive behaviour.

9. To build a network of women and men nationally, who connect into international networks and who are committed to developing the theory and practice of gender sensitive popular education; and,

10. To help build a democratic community and worker organizations and a strong civil society, which can lobby for change.[2]

Such approach has given women an agency, to use Sen's term, to take action into their hands. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of spontaneous movements against alcoholism, structural violence, witch-hunting and demand for women's share in development priorities and better networking and information sharing. This has also led to a greater strength in numbers and solidarity and greater understanding that biology is not destiny.

3 Education and Gender Equality

In Nepal, the girl child is regarded as a transient member of the family who needs to be prepared for her future role as an obedient wife, a good mother, and an efficient housekeeper. The boy child is looked upon as the mainstay of the family especially during old age. The girl is considered a burden or a financial liability owing to perceptions and traditions emanating from a patriarchal society regarding lineage, marriage, pattern of residence, inheritance, notions of femininity and masculinity. Girls are consistently deterred from realizing their right to education by ideas about what is considered appropriate and useful. Since the girl child leaves the family on marriage, educating her is not considered a worth-

2 'Her Words on His Lips: Gender and Popular Education in South Africa', Shirley Walters, 1991 in aspbae Courier, No.52, p.17.

while investment, although it is well established that educated mothers bring up healthier families and are more likely to provide education for their daughters. These gendered values translate into the denial of the rights of the girl child as well as the exploitation of her labour, mostly unpaid or underpaid. Recorded incidences of child labour are 11 per cent higher for girls than boys. More and more girls are becoming substitutes for mothers in the household looking after their younger siblings and spending three to four hours more on household chores than boys, while their mothers work outside the home to support the family. Moreover, poverty has created the phenomenon of child domestics, most of them girls, who are sent to work in urban households by their parents at the age of 6 or 7. Thus, girls are frequent targets of sexual abuse and are vulnerable to rape and trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation. It is estimated that in Nepal out of the estimated 7,000 girls and women trafficked every year, 30 per cent of them are under the age of 18.

Community monitoring indicates that girl children are fed less, and are less likely to be completely immunized compared to boys. Amongst already poor populations, this systematic denial sets the foundation for a litany of health problems that is compounded by early marriage, anaemia and frequent child-bearing. The virtual absence of health care services for women is not only evidenced in high maternal mortality rates but also in their low life expectancy.

The overall result is that girls continue to be dependent and an economic liability when in fact they provide valuable household and workplace labour that sustains the economy. Furthermore, these underlying patterns of discrimination deny them their childhood which is not only detrimental to their health, but deprives them of the right to participate effectively

in public and private spheres, owing to lack of education and access and control over resources. This creates an insurmountable barrier in achieving crucial positions in decision-making as a professional, manager and leader and severely limits her chances of living a dignified life when she becomes a woman.

Such a situation is further compounded by the lack of a clear conceptual linkage between gender equality and education. It is not enough to impart formal education alone for the sake of being able to count, add, read textbooks, write and conduct one's affairs in a stereotypical manner, thus maintaining the *status quo* of inequality and discrimination. The objective of education should not just be about knowing more, but about behaving differently. A prerequisite for overcoming gender gaps is understanding the context and nature of subordination and discrimination. Training plays a critical role as it enables both men and women to apply knowledge and acquire the skills to effect change in real life situations. Recently a popular Nepali film heroine, in the process of making a case in point in favour of education, asserted that women should not demand what is not theirs. Instead of demanding equal property rights they should concentrate on being good citizens and be content with becoming educated, she said with confidence. Such misconceptions are not confined to celebrities alone. The verdict given by the Supreme Court some eight years ago on women's parental property right decreed that daughters should be accorded equal property rights, but without upsetting patriarchal norms and values. It ordered the legislature to legislate to that effect. This generated a lot of heat and almost split the women's movement in Nepal. The 11th Amendment on Women's Rights Bill addressed various women's rights and meant in simple terms that daughters would be eligible to property at birth but would have to return it upon marriage. The contention was that the wife is entitled to a share of the husband's property. In reality however, in order to qualify she has to be 35 years old and

married for fifteen years; if she takes recourse in the law, it is a long, protracted and expensive affair – well nigh impossible
as she does not have the means to fight a legal battle. A woman has to choose between property and marriage, while the man can have both without any conditions attached.

Education for empowerment is a strategy for achieving gender equality and the advancement of women and therefore must address the historical, socio-economic, cultural and political factors which have acted to deprive poor women of access to education. Such a strategy must necessarily adopt a rights-based approach as all human beings are born with inherent rights and fundamental freedoms. The three pillars of human rights – universality, inalienability and indivisibility – assert human well-being above all else. The paradigm shift in development theories from income growth to well-being[3] necessitates an analysis of differential outcomes of development for both men and women. Development, therefore, needs to have a human face that focuses on those that have been excluded from the development mainstream.

No longer is preferential treatment a prerogative of the elite, but the deprived must have priority if the world is to progress, for the sake of its own survival. In recognition of this, the *Millennium Development Goals* serve as a resounding reminder of lop-sided development emanating from weak governance, bad policies, human rights abuses, conflicts, natural disasters, the spread of hiv/aids, the failure to address inequities in income, education and access to health care resulting in inequalities between men and women. They highlight the urgent need to redress such injustices through quantifiable indicators.[4]
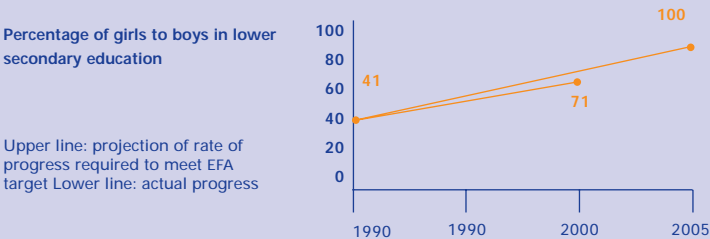
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3 cf Amartya Sen's approach to
development as freedom.
4 A Better World For All 2000, p.2

There is no doubt that education holds the key to enhancing the quality of life, learning not to assign one's state of being to fate or to see it as a pre-determined space where one has no say or control. Fatalism, the hallmark of many in a state of grinding poverty, is perhaps a safety valve for accepting the inevitable and can explain the accompanying inertia.

4 Universal Primary Education: An Achievable Goal?

Throughout the world governments are making conscious efforts to achieve *Education For All* (efa) by investing in the education sector to meet the *Millennium Development Goals* i.e. to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and to all levels of education no later than 2015. However, with global terrorism on the rise, governments are caught in a dilemma, with the urgency to maintain law and order on the one hand, and, equally important, to cater for basic needs and services such as education, health, drinking water, and sanitation on the other. This situation is particularly precarious for the poor and for developing countries where there is a grave and real risk of budgets allocated for the social sector being diverted to other sectors in the name of security and counter-insurgency. Thus, the eight *Millennium Development Goals* that confront the multi-dimensional issue of poverty and gender are central to the very existence of human beings as a race, cutting across all class, caste, colour, creed and ethnicity. In this context, universal primary education is not just a desirable goal but a practical necessity if future generations are to survive.

Percentage of girls to boys in lower secondary education

Upper line: projection of rate of progress required to meet EFA target Lower line: actual progress

Indicators	1990	2000	2015
Percentage of girls to boys in primary education (gross enrolment)	56*	78** (1999)	100
Percentage of girls to boys in lower secondary education (gross enrolment)	41*	71** (1999)	100
Percentage of girls to boys in higher secondary education (gross enrolment)	n.a.	65** (1999)	100

  *Ministry of Education, 1990.
**Ministry of Education, School Level Educational Statistics of Nepal, 1999.

The enrolment rate for boys and girls in primary schools in Nepal in 1999 was 100 : 78. At the lower secondary and secondary levels the girls to boys enrolment ratios (gbgers) were respectively, 71 per cent and 65 per cent. The 1999 ratio for different levels of school education shows that there have been significant improvements in the relative access of girls to school education. At the primary level, the gbger has risen by 2 per cent annually. At the lower secondary the gbger has increased by 3 per cent. In relation to completion, the "apparent graduation rate" at primary levels stands at 63 per cent[5] for boys while it is only 45.6 per cent for girls. Nevertheless, given the trend, it is unlikely that Nepal will reach parity in gbger at the primary level by 2005. At the secondary level, such parity is unlikely to be reached by 2005 either.[6]

Since the World Conference in Education for All (efa) in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, Nepal has embarked earnestly on fulfilling its commitments to efa by according top priority to primary and basic education and is in the process of finalising the National Plan of Action in the spirit of Dakar *Framework for Action* in order to achieve *Education for All* by 2015 and universal primary education by 2005.

5 Ministry of Education, 1999.
6 Progress Report 2002, Millennium
   Development Goals, Nepal. p.20.

One of the important steps taken by the Ministry of Education has been the 7th Amendment Education Act, which envisages the decentralization of management of government-run primary schools to the community themselves in tandem with local bodies. The Immediate Plan of Action of the Government of Nepal planned to hand over 100 government schools to the community by the year 2002 with the objective of expediting reforms in the effective management of public resources, prioritization of development projects and programmes, enhancement of accountability and effective delivery of public services. This has been the policy impact of the United Nations Development Fund (undp)-supported programme – Community Owned Primary Education (cope) which has been successful in demonstrating the efficacy of establishing local ownership in the management of primary schools, and in decentralizing primary education and planning and management to local bodies and the community.[7]

Since its inception in April 2000, the cope programme has been working to provide universal access to quality education for girls and children of disadvantaged communities. It also has a policy of recruiting local female teachers who have passed Class 10. This is in accordance with the International Conferences on *Education for All*; the Beijing *Platform For Action* which has identified Child's Right to Education as one of the twelve critical areas of concern; the World Summit on Social Development; and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women which provides for corrective measures on the principle of substantive equality. At the country level, the Local Self Governance Act, 1999, Article 257, gives the authority to local bodies to establish sectoral functional units including education, health, natural resources management, among others. Accordingly, with the active involvement of the concerned Local Bodies (lbs), cope has adopted the Community

7 A study on Devolution of Primary
    Education in Nepal, 2002.

Organizations (cos) already mobilized by the other undp programmes and, where this has not taken place, it has gone into partnership with mature cos mobilized by other ngos or donors to manage community owned schools.

Through the involvement of lbs and cos, cope's strategy has been successful in locating schools in unserved areas and in targeting girls, and the poor and disadvantaged children who otherwise tend to remain outside school, owing to long distances to reach schools and other socioeconomic factors. This has increased outreach to the hard-to-reach children. Now in most of the cope villages almost all of six to eight year old children are attending a cope school.

This programme, envisaged within a rights-based approach, is operating on the principles of good management:

- Deconcentration, delocation and devolution of authority to community organizations.

- Management of human, financial and intangible resources.

- Monitoring and evaluation of students' learning achievements and teachers' performance.

- Responsibility for motivation, mobilization and capacity building of local bodies and organizations.

- Legitimacy, transparency, participation and accountability to be implemented by the lbs and cos.

The salient features of this innovative programme are:

1. School Management Boards (smbs) are created by the cos themselves by electing 7 – 9 members to the board from among the co members. Out of this, it is mandatory to have two women members from the disadvantaged groups. From 2 – 7 cos have come together to form cope schools.

Responsibilities:

- The smbs are responsible for the administrative and financial manage-ment, maintenance, including provision of school premises and building as well as resource mobilization of the schools.

- They are also responsible for recruitment, promotion and annulment of the services of the schoolteachers.

- This implies that they are also responsible for close monitoring and evaluation of teachers' performance, thereby ensuring the quality of education imparted to the students.

- The smbs are also responsible for maintaining appropriate vertical and horizontal linkages at all times with the concerned l bs for garnering support, guidance, providing feedback on decentralized educational experience and other schools in the area.

2. The Local Government Structure together with the District Education Office (deo) has supported this decentralized primary education by signing Terms of Partnership with cope. This entails: (i) co-ordina-tion and support for cope schools by making available technical support for teacher training, monitoring and evaluation of teachers' performance; and (ii) allocation of budget and land for decentralized primary education at the recommendation of smbs.

3. Preparation of District Primary Education Profiles (dpep) and Village Primary Education Profiles (vpep). cope districts now have a computer--ized database of basic primary schools, students and teacher char-acteristics. The demographic and socio-economic data base of school catchment areas has facilitated the local bodies in locating cope schools in unserved and underserved areas and will inform future plans for upe in villages and settlements covered by cope.

4. The establishment of School Endowment Funds for the operation of cope schools. This has been one of the most successful features of cope in ensuring the sustainability of cope schools. Recently, a large number of rural primary schools staffed by teachers and funded by the government and the lbs were affected adversely as a result of the central government's withdrawal of the grants provided to these schools owing to the diversion in resources for dealing with the insurgency. The first to be withdrawn from the schools as a result of the schools introducing fees were girls and poor children.

There has been an overwhelming response to the cope schools. Parents whose children are attending cope schools are contributing a token amount of cash ranging from rs.5 to 25 per month according to their capacities to cost share and cross subsidize in their children's education. This is a demonstration of the community's commitment in ensuring quality and equity in education. Individuals and social workers have donated land and cash for the schools, including Members of Parliament. The demand for cope schools is increasing day by day as qualified and trained local women teachers staff all cope schools. This is not only motivating other girls in the area to complete their secondary education, but is also resulting in the emergence of enthusiastic suitors in marriage for cope teachers from the same village as they consider it a prestige to be associated with cope teachers. At the same time these teachers as change agents are becoming role models for their students as well.

cope has also demonstrated some radical departures in school environment and pedagogy. All cope schools are free of violence. Learning is not only fun, but also something to be engaged in to explore the magic of words and knowledge. Continuous assessments have resulted in remedial measures in time and the promotion rate is 100 per cent. The school cal-

endar and school hours follow the national norm, but local needs and variations are adjusted in fixing specific school days and schooling hours. This has been possible because decisions are made locally and in consultation with smbs, lbs, and deos.

The Gender Assessment of the Education Sector in Nepal carried out by undp in 2001 notes that the school-level education programmes generally do take note of the gender concerns (e.g. low enrolment rates of girls, gender gaps, high drop-out rates) and try to address them. Presently, only about one per cent of the total Education Sector budget, which comprises 13 per cent of the total national budget, is devoted to programmes targeting women or girls. This is not adequate in view of the existing educational disparities between men and women. The Assessment also points out that the programme/project implementers are predominantly men. Although they are generally aware of women's issues and have progressive views on gender, they lack the knowledge and skills to mainstream gender in their programmes/projects.

The challenges to achieving the *Millennium Development Goals* may be numerous, but they are not insurmountable. Any strategy that aims at unleashing the "power within" of the poor must give special attention to girls and women in order to eliminate gender inequality and discrimination. Such a strategy cuts across class, caste, creed, colour, ethnicity and language and means that development cannot be looked at in isolation. It must address the inter-connectedness of gender issues across the various sectors, as the Nepalese Constitution guarantees equality of all without any discrimination. Education must go hand in hand with empowerment and give girls and women the freedom to learn, choose, determine and pursue truth without being pressured to conform and subscribe to ideological or political perspectives. For of what use will it be if half of the population cannot read what is provided for in the Constitution and are hindered from exercising the right to live in equality, dignity and freedom?

The Ongoing Debate

C. Robinson

The papers in the preceding pages demonstrate that literacy is a multi-dimensional concept, and show how an understanding of its place in society depends on the starting point of each writer. This reason alone would be sufficient to explain and require that the debate about literacy should be ongoing, in order that different perspectives should enrich each other and contribute to a more careful and more effective way of undertaking literacy work. At the same time, there are more compelling reasons why we should ensure that the debate about literacy is ongoing. As one dimension of communication practice, literacy structures social change and is structured by it. As aspects of the social context change and evolve, so the use, meaning and role of literacy will need to be reconceptualized, its practices reviewed and its methods re-worked.

What follows is a digest of the debate emerging from a consideration of the issues raised in the preceding papers. Rather than proposing solutions or providing answers, this debate demonstrates the kinds of questions that we must continue to ask if literacy is to be a relevant communication tool embedded in the daily lives of people in diverse contexts. The eight topics below are central to evolving perceptions of literacy and will lead to other dimensions and concerns. The eight issues are the following (neither the order nor the nature of the issues implies any priority or special status):

• theory and practice of literacy.

• literacy and understandings of freedom.

• literacy and information and communication technologies (icts).

• literacy and gender.

• literacy in the context of *Education for All* (efa) and partnership.

• literacy and language.

• literacy and community.

• politics and policy in literacy.

1 Theory and Practice of Literacy

Recent literature on literacy has emphasized plural "literacies" rather than a single concept of literacy. This has been accompanied by a rejection of the dichotomy between literacy and illiteracy, in favour of a more subtle analysis of how people use various forms of literacy. In consequence there is a reluctance to use the terms "illiterate" or "illiteracy", defining people by what they lack and evoking pejorative connotations such as "ignorant", "backward" or "under-developed". To define a 'literate' norm is to condemn others to be abnormal, pitiable or exotic. This deficit model of dominant discourse in literacy prevents the achievement of the very practices which it is supposed to promote. By labelling others negatively as "illiterate", literacy agencies undermine the basis of existing knowledge, life experience and local culture on which literacy practices must be built if they are to be relevant and useful. Convinced of the need for literacy and of the absence of anything resembling it, the providers of literacy act in a condescending manner, assuming that the knowledge which literacy brings will be more valuable than that which learners already possess. While some way of talking about relative access to written communication practices is probably necessary, the dichotomous labelling 'literate/illiterate' leads in wrong directions and masks the questions that need asking in the planning of literacy work.

Literacy as social practice has focused attention on its uses in diverse contexts. The plural nature of literacies refers to a variety of contexts, of purpose, of language, of script and of mode and means of acquisition, among other things. Individuals may use various literacies in their daily lives as different needs arise under a variety of different circumstances.

This view of literacies has shed light on the political dimension of literacy – as a factor in the construction, imposition or maintenance of power. It has also revealed the many ways in which literacy is used to build per-

sonal and community identity, to organize life and to express knowledge and cultural heritage. Most importantly, these insights have shown how literacies, as societal phenomena, impinge on all our lives, whatever our personal degree of use of literacy, or, to put it more generally, our engagement with text. Thus the nature of literacy is seen to be more about social uses than individual skills.

For those involved in the promotion of literacy these notions are crucial in that they direct attention first to the wider social context before addressing how literacy might be acquired, or indeed whether it might be acquired. In consequence, issues of language, of broad communication practices and of historical context become paramount literacy issues – with clear implications for promoting literacy, for instance, among minority and indigenous groups.

These theories of literacy have said little about the practice of literacy promotion and literacy acquisition. While literacy is recognized as a fundamental to the right to education, and while many proponents of "literacies" are concerned to optimize the use of literacies in a wide range of communities, a gap between theory and practice persists. Why this is so may emerge from debate of the issues below, for it is as the theory of literacy comes up against the social fabric of particular situations that its insights will be affirmed or found wanting.

2 Literacy and Understandings of Freedom

Literacy makes sense in context – is the same true of freedom? Universal definitions of freedom abound in international documents and pro-nouncements, yet none of that guarantees any particular freedom for a particular group of people. Freedom, like literacy, is lived (or it is not) and is often defined in practice by the particular "unfreedoms", to use Sen's phrase, which people experience in their daily lives. The connections

between literacy and freedom depend on how literacy enables people to challenge and change the unfreedoms in their lives, or whether it can do so. Fascinating and complementary aspects of those connections emerge in the debate; they are not at odds with one another, but demonstrate different emphases from different situations. The connections have to be understood against the background of particular societies and cultures.

From Palestine comes an emphasis on the freedom from fear to speak. Literacy and education by themselves do not lead to freedom, and are indeed dominated by the same forces which limit the freedom to speak. Therefore literacy does not always bring freedom, because it may be used in the service of the dominant and the powerful. This kind of literacy often silences people's expression because of the overwhelming power of professionals and institutions. How can we be as free as possible from this enveloping discourse and discover new spaces of expression?

From the women of Nepal comes a cry for freedom from injustice, discrimination, inequality and exploitation – "unfreedoms" which are embedded in social and domestic structures. In such a context certain kinds of literacy can lead to opportunities to assert themselves, to relate to government and other institutions on their own behalf, to understand not only why things are the way the way they are but also how to change them. Will literacy be sufficient to achieve this? Not on its own, but it may accompany and support steps to increase the self-confidence and collective initiative needed to begin to change oppressive relationships.

In Eritrea freedom is interpreted by government development agencies as meaningful participation as citizens in society. Beyond the token involvement of local people in the government's or other people's development efforts, meaningful participation gives voice and a capacity to act based

on local realities and culture. Literacy in the people's languages is not only a tool for learning and the most accessible medium (though not always readily available), but it also gives value to people's local identity and facilitates their understanding of their own being.

For the indigenous peoples of Ecuador freedom is about full opportunity to be themselves. Structural and institutionalized relationships cause them always to be on the receiving end of what others think should be done, of other people's knowledge, other people's vision of the world. When will those in power and those with power begin to learn the ways and knowledge of indigenous peoples, rather than eternally the other way round? Freedom will start when there is recognition of their language, and their culture. Literacy in indigenous languages, and multilingual literacies for all not just indigenous peoples, are both a step and a powerful symbol in the process.

Among rural communities in India, freedom is a change in the structural relations which keep them marginalized, deprived of opportunity and subject to the powerful and wealthy. No community exists as an isolated island, particularly in the era of globalization. Yet each community has its knowledge, its cultural riches and its defining traditions. Literacy, and multilingual literacies, are one among an array of means to empowerment, understood as a change in structural and political relations, a position from which to assert their rights. In this perspective, literacy is about knowledge – discovering local meaning and global meaning.

From the perspective of the United Kingdom and with an awareness of the dominant discourse of the West, literacy raises issues of power – manifested through language, gender relations and in many other ways. Literacy can function as a means of empowerment when it moves people

outside of dominant ideologies. Whatever unfreedoms exist and where literacy is one means of transforming them, the process must above all start with respect for the people concerned.

3 Literacy and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

Information and communication technologies (icts) can be liberating! – instant communication around the world, rapid dissemination of written, visual and audio material, access to masses of information, enhanced production of documents, storage and manipulation of vast quantities of data, tools for speedy calculation and design, ready outlet for ideas and self-expression, flexible means of transmitting text, image and sound. But not for everyone. Electricity, phone lines, computers and the necessary training and back-up – with the means to pay for them – are the essential conditions of using icts… and so is literacy!

The effective use of icts requires a certain kind of literacy – reading and understanding alphanumeric characters as well as small and large images and icons. It requires keyboard skills and an understanding of the way computer programmes work. It often requires a knowledge of a dominant language not your own. It requires concepts and understanding which enable a meaningful interpretation of information. This kind of literacy may be different from and in addition to other literacies which an individual or a community uses. To move from a non-written culture to a written one is an issue of self-identity and position within society. People may be producers or consumers of information on the computer, or both – which of these is a critical issue in planning programmes.

New literacies and "illiteracies" are emerging from the technological revolution, which has opened new visions and great possibilities. At the same time the tendency of icts to centralize and promote uniformity

renders the promotion of diversity more urgent and more challenging. As with literacy itself, or indeed any education, icts can serve to liberate or to oppress, to use Paulo Freire's terms. Plans for the use of technological aids in literacy work must address the full range of technologies, with a view to selecting the most appropriate for a particular situation. These include radio, tv audiovisuals, video and audio tapes, in addition to computers and the internet. Pen and paper will often remain central in literacy practices. Whatever technologies are selected, the way in which they are used will be a crucial element in determining how useful, appropriate and relevant they are.

The digital divide is much talked about, but the literacy dimension does not figure prominently in the debate. Excitement about the possibilities offered by icts frequently masks the issues raised in particular contexts. For instance, there is frequently little understanding of how literacy fits in with other communication practices, let alone how ict literacy does so. This raises further issues of the use of literacy and icts for self-expression, for the validation and use of local knowledge, of the power of other people's knowledge and the confrontation between the two. Questions of script and language use in electronic communication and on the screen are also issues often neglected in the headlong rush to make icts available. Methodologies are urgently needed to plan for the use of local knowledge in digital form, taking seriously the question of what languages such material should use and how content should be determined. This will involve training trainers in content development; this can be more difficult than it first appears since existing teachers and trainers are often hesitant about using new technologies.

How can icts enhance the literacy learning process? There are few models and it would be useful to disseminate information on successful uses of icts in literacy work, illustrating various settings and groups of learners.

The use of icts raises fundamental questions of society and of development, such as: whose knowledge? whose language? whose culture? whose tomorrow? The nature and use of literacy/literacies go to the heart of these issues. The learner should not be faced with a *fait accompli*, but rather first be enabled to understand and assess how icts, and the literacies they imply, will enhance her/his life and her/his contribution to society. People need to be able to have an informed choice on icts, in particular since written and oral cultures are being transformed by icts. In the ongoing debate, some key questions remain to be addressed, such as the following:

• How can literacy programmes most effectively respond so that huge numbers of people are not excluded from new freedoms and new opportunities?
• Is the imposition of other people's knowledge through icts inevitable among vulnerable and small populations, such as minorities and indigenous peoples?
• What have we learnt about the links between literacy and people's capacity to communicate through other means?

4 Literacy and Gender

If two-thirds of non-literates were men would we still be facing the challenges we face? Many now suggest that illiteracy may be a female phenomenon – two-thirds of those without access to literacy are women. This does not seem to change much, in spite of the fact that investment in female education is one of the most potent factors in development. This situation goes along with many other aspects of female disadvantage and inequality – lack of income, overwork, little participation in decision-making in family or community, abuse and violence, and so on. Lack of literacy is one of the many ways in which women are marginalized. Why is it taking so long to get to grips with this problem?

There is widespread understanding of the benefits of women becoming literate – case studies document the benefits to themselves and to their family, children, and community. Positive effects are felt in many areas, such as personal growth and development, health, income, care of children, schooling of girls. However, an understanding of the benefits has not translated into systematic and adequate efforts to change the situation. In some literacy programmes, the participation of women is high, but in others it is not, particularly where the overall (women and men) literacy rate is low. One way or another, the lion's share of opportunities and resources goes to men.

What approaches to literacy are going to be most effective in helping women achieve greater freedom? Literacy frequently aims at the autonomy of the individual, but on the premise that written communication is the means, whereas empowerment also involves development of oral expression and the knowledge women already have. This needs to be an integral part of literacy work with women – for women to have increased voice in family, community and society at large, both oral and written expression will be required.

Literacy is only as valuable as what people can achieve through it, and so promoting literacy needs to be linked with relevant purposes in women's lives. Acquiring literacy will best be achieved where women are, at the same time, engaging in other profitable learning, whether linked to farming and income generation, family life and health, community participation or cultural and religious expression. Furthermore, the daily activities and concerns of women will govern the circumstances under which women may learn – time, location, duration, groups, and so on. Special attention should be given to language and culture issues in women's literacy. Since they frequently travel less and are less exposed to national or

Illiteracy: a Female Phenomenon?

A presentation by the Bureau of Strategic Planning, UNESCO

Facts: A Wake-Up Call.

• Two-thirds of the world's 862 million illiterates are women.

• 70% of the poor in the world are women.

• 113 million primary school children are being denied their right to education.

 Almost two-thirds of them are female.

• Fewer girls than boys finish primary school. By the time they reach 18, girls have an

 overage of 4.4 years less education than boys.

Many Related Contributing Factors.

• Investing in girls' and women's education is not considered profitable by many poor

 communities. In many patriarchal societies women and girls are denied their fundamental   human rights, among them, the right to education.

• Girls in many countries are expected to begin helping out at an early age with household   responsibilities which prevents them from attending formal schooling.

• In some countries, empowering women through education is not considered essential

 and sometimes contrary to the role that they are expected to perform.

Strategic objectives in education.

• Ensure equal access to education.

• Eradicate illiteracy among women.

• Develop non-discriminatory education and training.

• Promote lifelong education and training for girls and women.

Mainstreaming Gender

Gender mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action including legislation, policies, and programmes, in any area and at all levels.

Promoting gender-sensitive literacy

• Balanced gender roles in textbooks.

• Female role models in all learning materials.

• Literacy learning at suitable times and in suitable places.

• Women as facilitators and animators.

• Planning literacy learning in line with how women want to use literacy.

Moving from literacy to literacies

• Adapting to social, cultural and religious contexts.

• Connecting literacy with practical purposes and uses.

• Linking literacy with sustainable local development.

• Teaching literacy in local languages.

official languages, use of the local language in initial literacy is essential, with opportunities to access other languages as part of the ongoing programme.

Lack of access to literacy is symptomatic of wider gender relations in societies. While literacy can be an instrument in levelling the playing field for women, there are many cases where literacy will not be on offer until a greater balance of gender relations is achieved. Thus literacy for women requires a deeper understanding of gender relations and a stronger commitment to changing them. It will certainly require change in societal attitudes and behaviour, both individually and collectively.

Adult education and lifelong learning in general are low on the agenda and receive few resources in many places. Government budgets for adult learning are miniscule compared to budgets for schooling. This means that women have even less chance as adults to access literacy and education – fewer opportunities are on offer for adults, and those that exist are less accessible to women. There will be little change in the proportion of female literacy while adult learning is so scarce.

5 Literacy in the Context of Education for All (EFA)

efa is the over-arching global framework for increasing educational opportunity, and partnership is its basic mode of operation. The efa agenda not only includes a specific goal on adult literacy, but implies increasing levels of literacy across all the six goals. The Dakar *Framework for Action* puts a high value on developing broad partnerships, with a special emphasis on including civil society in all aspects of efa. Nowhere is this more necessary and evident than in adult literacy.

It would be a grave mistake to limit literacy action to the efa goal of increasing literacy levels by 50 per cent by 2015. All the Dakar goals imply

the promotion of literacy – whether in early childhood education, in quality primary schooling, as part of life-skills, as an element in gender equality in education or as a fundamental component of quality of learning opportunity. Literacy is a basic learning tool – whether in developing or industrialized countries - literacy is crucial for accessing education and for making the most of those opportunities. It is in this perspective that the United Nations launched the Literacy Decade (2003-2012).

Commonsense would dictate that literacy be high on the efa agenda. But is it? It should be a central element, but in fact adult literacy is relegated to a secondary concern, far behind the promotion of primary schooling. This pattern was observed in the decade following Jomtien, and is repeating itself now. Lobbying to date has produced almost no response from efa financing partners to give increased attention to the 860 million plus adults without literacy opportunities. Nor has the issue of literacy been recognized as a key element of the whole Dakar agenda, either in global efa forums, or in government budgeting. Civil society has become an accepted partner in many efa circles, at national level in some countries, and at international level. In the international efa mechanisms, there is a need to develop alliances between civil society, concerned southern governments and unesco to lobby funding agencies for greater commitment and resources for adult learning in general and literacy opportunities in particular.

Partnerships among a wide variety of stakeholders promote efa from local to international level. At international level the formal structures ensure that governments, civil society, bilateral and multilateral agencies are dialoguing together around the table. At national level efa forums do the same, but they are not in place or functioning well in many countries. Farther down the ladder at local community level, all kinds of informal

and ad hoc partnerships are formed. A key to making them even more effective is active government participation – not domination – in them. Community partnerships must include local village leadership structures.

Literacy work is most effective when it is conducted according to local cultural norms and purposes; to design such work requires transparency in dialogue between partners so that perspectives and assumptions can be openly discussed and forms of co-operation agreed. This kind of inclusive partnership at local level implies the use of the local language for planning as well as for literacy, with other languages used as necessary.

6 Literacy and Language

Language emerges as a central issue in the debate – emphasized by stake-holders particularly with regard to implementing the United Nations Literacy Decade. This concern echoes many international declarations and pronouncements, and yet there is a new urgency around the topic. Why is this? Two reasons may be given: firstly, access to literacy in one's own language, often referred to as the mother tongue, is seen not only as the best educational approach to acquiring literacy, but as a fundamental right. Secondly, there is a concern, if not a frustration, that little is being done actively to implement this right on a large scale. Many hundreds of minority and indigenous groups across the world suffer particularly from this neglect. In Nepal, sixty-one different groups remain marginalized from many opportunities because of language – no effort is made to enable their languages to be used as mediums of education. This situation is repeated on every continent, where the dominance of official, colonial or national languages is regarded as a necessary and immutable, if unfortunate, state of affairs. Multilingual approaches where the local language and others in common use are given space in literacy work are few and far between, but models exist and effective

practices have been developed. unesco has a role to play in promoting and facilitating these approaches.

Changing the *status quo* will take a strong and long-term commitment, including co-operation to develop alphabets and writing systems where these do not yet exist. This is a necessary part of realizing the right to education in one's own language. Language is not only the key means of communication, but also a powerful symbol of identity and culture. A further aspect, beyond basic literacy, is the need to put secondary and technical/vocational textbooks into local languages, in order that knowledge is not only learnt, but critically assessed and appropriately applied in the local context.

The issue of language goes well beyond literacy – it connects with knowledge, local and exogenous, with access to opportunity, with self-expression, with cultural heritage and identity, with relations between community and institutions, with governance and participation. The use in literacy work of all the languages which a community habitually uses for communication is the starting point for a full appreciation of the local and the basis for building mutually respectful relations with the global.

7 Literacy and Community

One of the lessons of adult literacy work over the last 20 years is that it flourishes best when the fullest account is taken of the local context. Using the languages of community is part of that, as is the primacy of the local community in designing and delivering modes of literacy acquisition. This implies space, but not isolation – more space for communities to live as they wish and to define whether and how literacy may be of relevance. Literacy itself is unlikely to be the starting point, but rather relevant themes and social preoccupations. To characterize these process-

es as bottom-up, in contrast to top-down may not advance the debate – what is needed is space for local initiative without interference. 'More interaction, but less interference' is more likely to give opportunity for the emergence of self-learning communities, where education leads to other training and development activities.

Community ownership of initiatives in literacy or other collective endeavours is an essential counterweight to the unequal process of globalisation. Solidarity, collective self-confidence, assured identity may be facilitated by local literacies and will provide a basis for the assertion of rights and a voice in the wider social fabric. Literacy in itself will not do this, but it may promote it by providing a social space and a learning opportunity. Recent history is littered with the debris of failed literacy programmes which were designed elsewhere and were someone else's good idea for communities. Only when there is localized and flexible planning and design of literacy work, taking full account of the various literacies of the local environment, will literacy become a tool of collective opportunity and freedom.

8 Politics and Policy

As social practice, literacy has political implications – it may be used to gain power, to maintain or challenge it. It may be an instrument in overturning repressive or undemocratic regimes. It may, as Freire reminded us, be an instrument of political domination and domestication, the very opposite of freedom and liberation. Where literacy has been forbidden by a political elite, as has been the case in certain parts of the world, literacy itself becomes an expression of political freedom and voice.

Even though the political implications are clear, or in some cases because of that, literacy struggles to maintain a high profile or priority on politi-

cal agendas. It must be part of unesco's role to raise the profile of literacy work and to devise advocacy strategies, in partnership with others, in order to sustain political momentum for literacy. This is all the more pressing because the implementation of the Dakar *Framework for Action* is in danger, after only two years, of marginalizing learning opportunities for out-of-school youth and adults, including literacy.

A number of specific policy issues merit particular mention:

• the need to include all stakeholders in all the processes of literacy work.

• the need to negotiate state and civil society roles in literacy so that ngos are not merely filling gaps left by the state.

• the inclusion in literacy programming of disabled people, whatever the nature of their disability.

• the need to integrate the United Nations Literacy Decade with other initiatives, for example in poverty reduction and for indigenous peoples.

• the need to address the literacy needs of migrant populations, in Europe and elsewhere, paying attention to questions of language and language learning unesco's role in literacy promotion is vital, with clear calls to unesco' to;

• undertake advocacy with governments and influence governance structures for literacy.

• serve as a watchdog on the development of literacy policies and the allocation of resources.

• serve as a guarantor for local initiatives (giving moral backing and quality assurance).

• set standards in the design and practice of literacy work (for example, inclusive planning, use of languages, opportunities for women, equitable development of ict use, among others).

• facilitate connections and partnerships between all stakeholders.

Recommendations[1]

Around 200 people from a wide variety of cultural and professional backgrounds met to address the question of "Literacy as Freedom". In our exchanges we found that we shared a strong and positive commitment to literacy as an element in freeing us to be all that we can be as human beings. We engaged in lively discussion, but were united in one fundamental principle: action for literacy must be anchored at the local community level – language choice, programme decisions, value and use of literacy – these must all emerge from the local level with support from other organizations.

We present these recommendations to unesco in order to give further shape to the United Nations Literacy Decade.

With regard to the *theory and practice* of literacy we recommend:
• that the role of governments, national and international organizations is to help and support local initiatives. No-one should have the power to impose their opinion on local communities. Support should include resources of all kinds, for example:
- financial allocations by governments, national and international bodies.
- information and exchange in the form of case studies, stories and experiences from other parts of the world. This information should be freely available and uncensored, with the community making decisions about its relevance and use.

• that the voice of indigenous peoples should be clearly heard in formulating literacy policies, in particular by bringing together for international meetings representatives from local preparatory meetings.

1 A set of recommendations was addressed to unesco regarding the planning and implementation of the United Nations Literacy Decade, as the output from the round-table. These recommendations appear here in the form in which they were presented publicly on International Literacy Day 2002.

- that special attention always be given to the mother tongue, including local sign languages, within a multilingual approach which enables communities to use literacy in additional languages they may need or demand.

In considering the exciting possibilities around *literacy and information and communication technologies (ICTs),* we recommend that unesco:

- facilitate and promote multiple technologies especially in developing countries, promoting the appropriate use of diverse technologies (radio, video, low-cost printing, computers and telephones) respecting the local context and languages.

- ensure initiatives are not technology-led, but rather led by learning and social processes, especially linked to literacy programmes which themselves are part of wider social, economic and political development.

- ensure that such initiatives start from a position of respect for people, culture and identity, especially their own language, knowledge and vision, enabling people to become producers not just consumers of information, active citizens and not just passive recipients.

- play a key role in disseminating learning around successful innovations in literacy and building its own database.

- keep in mind power and equity issues at all levels so that initiatives do not increase the digital divide between countries or communities.

We recognize the critical nature of *women's literacy* and so recommend:

- to place "Literacy as Freedom" for women as the highest priority in education.

- to sensitize all stakeholders about gender concerns in literacy.

- to promote gender-sensitive literacy programmes that are linked with livelihood strategies and women's empowerment.

- to support gender-sensitive literacy training, pedagogy and material (inter-generational knowledge, life skills).

- to professionalize literacy work and improve the status of literacy workers.

- to design a flexible and multi-pronged approach to women's literacies.

We see literacy work as part of *Eduction for All* (efa) *efforts and partnerships* and so recommend that:

- literacy be based on a rights-based approach and a policy of inclusion for human development. This implies that literacy be available in the mother tongue.

- literacy be a component of *all* development programmes. This means that a certain percentage of official development assistance (oda) be earmarked for literacy.

- unesco be active at country level in forming strong and viable partnerships with governments, civil society, ngos and community organizations to support local initiatives such as publishing books, libraries and reading centres.

- partnerships be developed with the aging population and youth for encouraging adult literacy and achieving universal primary education.

- energy be devoted to advocacy and creation of worldwide net works for achieving efa goals, particularly "literacy for all", and the *Millennium Development Goals*. Literacy, as the key to lifelong learning and a basic element of adult learning, must remain at the heart of our educational agenda.

Conclusion

Literacy is a controversial topic. It excites passions among promoters and animators, among academics and educational thinkers, in governmental and non-governmental circles, among adult learners. What literacy is for, who promotes it, how it is used, what the institutional context is, whose material forms the basis of learning, what language it is in, the relative importance given to writing and reading, the nature of the literate environment – these are all important, unavoidable questions to which there is no standard answer nor universal solution. If there were, the world would have found it by now. The need to continue to debate such questions is underlined by the persistent scandal of around 862 million people who have no access to written communication in any way.

The papers of this volume maintain that literacy is part and parcel of the pursuit of freedom, itself a central tenet of development no matter whose definition is chosen. However, the papers also point out that not all literacy necessarily leads to freedom – schooled and institutional literacy can eclipse local knowledge and may even deprive people of mental habits based in orality which also enrich life and are part of freedom. Literacy may come with such a heavy historical overhang of colonial relationships that its use still implies acceptance of other people's languages, knowledge and communication practices. Or it may be so entrenched as part of the power differential between men and women that radically new approaches must be tried if writing and reading are to offer women new paths to freedom, self-respect and social voice. Literacy may be associated, almost by definition, with someone else's language or script in such a way that the very idea that literacy might promote freedom – of expression, of identity, of culture – seems absurd.

Yet in spite of these many insights into the negative aspects of literacy, the contributors remain convinced that literacy *does* offer new chances of

freedom. Why is this? In the light of past experience, what is the basis of their optimism? The answer to this question is important, since all of us involved in literacy promotion would rather pursue a worthwhile and motivating goal, rather than one which leads in the opposite direction. All of the writers see a role for literacy, but what matters above all is the way literacy is promoted, offered, acquired and used. It is clearly not enough to state the problem of illiteracy in the world today and leap into action – full dialogue and consultation, careful planning and design are, if we are to heed the appeals of these practitioners and planners, an absolute necessity. What shape should such preparation take?

A distillation of the contributors' wisdom points in the following directions:

- understand first how literacy fits into the communication patterns and practices of groups and communities: do not assume literacy is an incontrovertible good.

- compare and contrast literacy with other means and practices of communication – orality, radio, electronic means: literacy is only as valuable as its communication function.

- look at literacy in terms of local language practices and cultural values: do not plan literacy from the centre.

- link literacy with other aspects of life (work, health, production, cultural expression and religion): do not plan literacy as a stand-alone activity.

- acknowledge the social and communicative context of literacy: do not deliver it merely as a technical skill.

- expect that literacy learning and use, and literacy materials will differ from one group or community to another: there are no standard approaches to literacy acquisition.

- acknowledge and explore the entrenched links between literacy and power differentials, between individuals and institutions, between women and men, between urban and rural, between majorities/élites and the poor/minorities/indigenous peoples: literacy is never a neutral tool.

- expect complexity in literacy work, since it intersects with whatever social issues exist in a group or community: simple and standard solutions have not worked.

- expect connections with an ever-widening circle of organizations and institutions – literacy, if of use, may be taken up by anyone: if literacy does not flow beyond the learning context, it is of no value.

- the knowledge of the learners is the starting point for literacy, not any one else's knowledge: literacy that just brings messages does not empower, it domesticates.

A number of principles lie behind this wisdom and they are well-known and frequently articulated, particularly by international organizations of all kinds – respect for diversity, validation of local knowledge, culture and language, dialogue and co-operation, a policy environment informed by the grassroots, empowerment strategies, among others. These principles and the practical implications spelt out by the contributors to this volume present a challenge to all those engaged in promoting literacy work, whether ngos and community-based organizations, government departments or international agencies. The challenge is particularly demanding for international organizations, of which unesco is one. For such agencies, the question is: how can work at policy level (which is where international organizations operate) ensure that the attention to context, the emphasis on consultation and dialogue, the fine-grained analysis of communication practices and the analysis of the power

dimension are given adequate attention? A complete answer would fill volumes, but let me give two fundamental principles in reply:

- partnership orientation: working to each partner's strengths requires an organizational culture which is fundamentally oriented towards working with others, sharing knowledge and resources, with a readiness to give away control.

- modelling processes: an organization must practise what it preaches – the modelling of empowering processes and relationships sends powerful messages which ripple out from the organization to open up new spaces of confidence and commitment.

These may be well-known, but they are among the hardest to implement. They challenge not only organizational practices and structures, but also our personal attitudes and behaviour.

It is not surprising that literacy leads us to such reflections. Literacy, in its use as in its promotion, only leads to freedom when it supports and is supported by a social, cultural and intellectual climate of openness, debate, dialogue and respect for difference. The papers in this volume push us in that direction – let us change what is necessary to move together down that road.